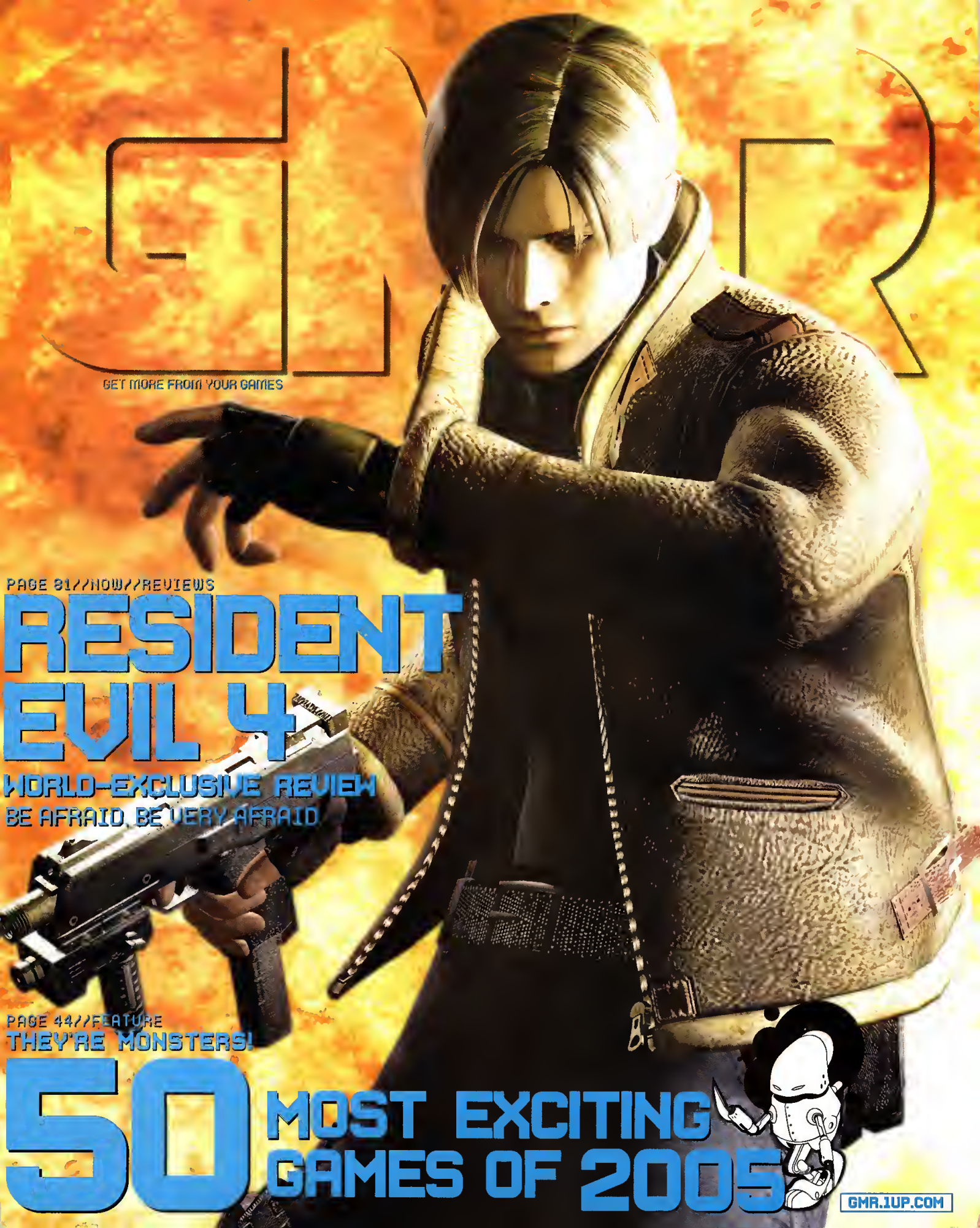
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PAGE 44//FEATURE

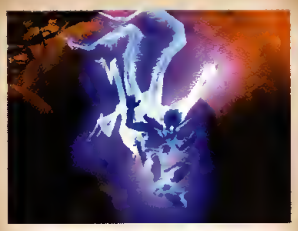
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50 MOST EXCITING GAMES OF 2005

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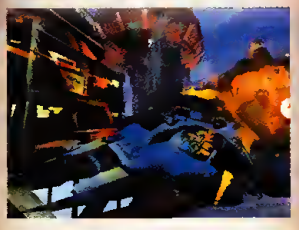
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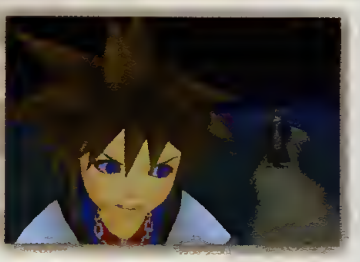












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THIS MONTH ON GMR.1UP.COM

Can't get enough *GMR*? Not to worry—there's more content for you at GMR.1UP.com! This month we'll post an interview with the *Resident Evil 4* team, as well as more from Lorne Lanning on the history of the *Oddworld* series. Check back every day for the latest news from the videogame world.

BLOG HEAVEN

Who are those mysterious *GMR* contributors? Check out their 1UP.com blogs!



EGMSHANE.1UP.COM

Shane Bettenhausen helped us out with a bunch o' reviews this issue on top of his normal, backbreaking day job as previews editor for *Electronic Gaming Monthly*. He blogs, too! How does he do it?



CGW-RYAN.1UP.COM

Computer Gaming World's previews editor Ryan Scott regularly assists *GMR* in our unending, arduous task of bringing you the best previews, reviews, and online news in the biz.

CLUB O' THE MONTH



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Visit http://boards.1UP.com and you can join the craziness at *GMR*'s "Nuclear War on the Dance Floor" official board. This is your chance to sound off on everything from the extremely unfair score given to game X, your lame friends, or how rad this issue is. Of course, there's a full slate of boards out there on every gaming-related topic, so you don't have limit yourself.... Get posting.

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ONLY THE GOOD DIE YOUNG

In just two short years, *GMR* has become a force in gaming. Our covers are the envy of our competitors. Our news section sifts out what truly affects your gaming. Our previews spotlight future titles that will rock your world, and our reviews are praised for their honest and on-target critiques. And like the cherry on a shake—in this case, an overripe cherry—the Game Geezer tops it all off with his thinking out loud on issues that affect us all. In short, we've been riding a wave of success that has shown no evidence of slowing down.

All of this makes it difficult to inform you that this is the final issue of *GMR*. It's as shocking for us as it is for you. I'd explain the reasons, but they're not important. (You should expect a notice in the mail soon about what happens with your subscription. Also be aware that our parent company Ziff Davis publishes *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Computer Gaming World*, and *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine*—the best gaming mags in the universe.)

GMR goes out with a bang, not a whimper. For starters, this issue features our truly exclusive review of *Resident Evil 4*, the latest and possibly greatest in Capcom's outstanding action-horror series. Find out more on page 81.

Then come the monsters! Beginning on page 44, our annual survey of the 50 most exciting games of 2005 provides a sneak peek of what's in store for the coming year. Can '05 top '04 in the sheer number of triple-A titles? It remains to be seen of course, but we're pretty stoked.

To all *GMR* readers, thanks for everything. We might have been the ones who put the magazine together each month, but you're the ones who have made it special.

_Tom Byron, EIC



CARRIE SHEPHERD - MANAGING EDITOR



My past year at *GMR* has been very rad, and I'll miss it—and all the readers who loved the magazine—very much. I'll miss basking in the musical wealth of James Mielke, reading the thoughtful prose of Andrew Pfister, admiring the superb style of Caroline King, dishing the dirt with Tom Byron, rapping the rap with Christian Nutt, and shaking my head in disbelief at the outrageousness of Gerry Serrano, as well as chowing the candy over in copy edit. I'll miss all the guys and gals at Ziff's other fine pubs as well. Kisses to everyone who made *GMR* the bee's knees. See you around.

JAMES MIELKE - EXECUTIVE EDITOR



I would like to say thank you to everyone who supported *GMR* over the past two years. We all know which gaming magazine is the best, and you're holding it in your hands (it definitely isn't the competition's rag—you know who you are). Love to mom and dad; I'm doin' my best every day. Big ups to the Roundabouts, to everyone who ever sold or bought a copy of *GMR*, and to all the great companies we've worked with over the last 24 issues. We tried to do you right. And thanks to the best crew I've ever worked with. You're the most talented sack full of greased lightning I've ever worked with. You rock.

CHRISTIAN NUTT - ASSOCIATE EDITOR



I was a late addition to *GMR*, stepping up in April, but that doesn't mean I loved it any less than the rest of the staff. I respected and enjoyed the magazine from day one, and joining it was the best moment of my career. I'm so proud of what we were able to do with this magazine. It was truly different than anything else around, and better than most. It's my regret not just that I'm losing my job, but that the gaming community is losing one of the best magazines in the business—whether or not I was a part of it.

ANDREW PFISTER - ASSOCIATE EDITOR



From the beginning, we at *GMR* have been advocates for quality. Whether it was a game developed by 300,000 employees at EA or published by three employees at Natsume, we wanted good games to get the recognition they deserved. I'd like to thank my fellow staff members whom I adore and respect so much, Simon, David, and Tom P., everyone else in the Ziff building, all of our contributors, and anyone who has ever read an issue of *GMR* and found something new to try. Expand yourselves.

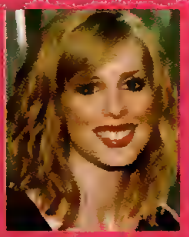
GERRY SERRANO - ART DIRECTOR



It's over...no more whisky-soaked nights, no more sincere death threats, no more loud hip-hop against blaring alt country—just one last mad dash to finish a very good magazine crewed by a good team. Everyone here is good people, some of the best around. For all those that have moved on and to those that are still here, I will miss you all. It was fun.

To you readers, thanks for letting us go crazy with our crayons on these pages the last couple years. Hope you like what we drew for you. Peace out.

CAROLINE KING - DESIGNER



The past two years have been very different, difficult, fantastic, enlightening, and a little bit nuts. I have loved working with such amazing people. Simon, thanks for taking a chance on me. Diddle, thanks for being my big brother, James, thanks for the compliments and hot jamz. Pfister, thanks for loving Barry White like I do, David, thanks for being the rock star. Gerry, thanks for being so nuts that you make me look so normal, Mr. Byron, thanks for taking over, Carrie, thanks for keeping me sane, Christian, thanks for sharing your cookies. Everyone else, thanks for being my family.

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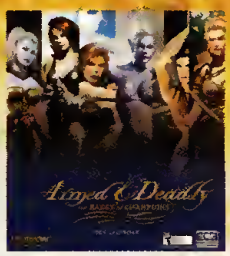


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POST

WE'VE BEEN BUSY. SO HAVE YOU.



→ What a phenomenal last few months for the gaming industry. We saw the release of the best games ever made, the best sales numbers ever seen, and the launch of a new system. Maybe our January issue should have been headlined "2004: THE GREATEST YEAR EVAR!"

I AM NOT AN ANIMAL. I AM A MAN.

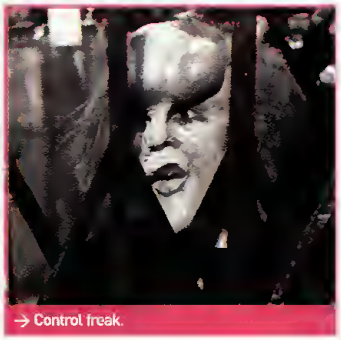
Hey, guys and gals. Just wanted to thank you for your great mag. Keep up the superb work!

One hiccup I noticed occurred in the December 2004 issue [#23] in the "Control Freak" [feature]. In your review of the Sylvania RadioWave controller, you stated that it's "best recommended as a present for gamers with elephantitis of the hands."

I wanted to point out that elephantitis means "inflamed elephant." I believe you were referring to elephantiasis, the disease that causes a part of a person's body to be abnormally large. Here is Dictionary.com's definition:

"Chronic, often extreme enlargement and hardening of cutaneous and subcutaneous tissue, especially of the legs and external genitals, resulting from lymphatic obstruction and usually caused by infestation of the lymph glands and vessels with a filarial worm."

As official representative of inflamed elephants everywhere, I felt it necessary to clear the air for the group I represent. We're working on getting antihistamines to all inflamed elephants so they can



→ Control freak.

enjoy videogames just like their normal, noninflamed brethren. For only 39 cents a day, you can help drug an elephant....

Anyway, thanks again for the excellent job! And I was just kidding about representing inflamed elephants. I've only seen elephants at the zoo. Or in the checkout line at Wal-Mart.
_Brian DeWitt

Thanks, Brian, for a minute there we thought we were actually learning something. But after an extensive and painstaking investigation, we've concluded you're just plain wack. According to your beloved Dictionary.com, elephantitis means "an infectious tropical disease that is a form of filaiasis caused by parasitic worms which are transmitted by mosquitoes and which causes swelling in the genitals or thighs." We will admit that given this definition, elephantitis of the hands seems pretty unlikely, assuming, of course, that people use their *hands* on their controller.

RESIDENT GAMECUBE

I read the PlayStation Knowledge column in *GMR* #24 [January 2005] and I can't believe the audacity of Mr. Davison. My brother and I were both offended by the remarks that he considers the GameCube the reason why *Resident Evil* isn't exactly having a great time. How does Capcom seem to get away from the blame? Would Mr. Davison feel that it would be fair if every game in the series was redone with major upgrades like the first game? If the games didn't come out, the only way to get the collection from the very beginning would be on the PS1. Capcom is just providing a library for the GameCube, even if it's just rehashes. Does the PlayStation provide a wider audience? Yes, but it doesn't take away from the fact that GameCube has been hitting more homes with its $99 price tag, and that the holiday season is here. Look at all the games that have come out since the *Resident Evil* remake. The quality of games has reached very high production values. Knowing that it takes time to put out a game of high quality should also be considered a reason for blame. Let's call a spade a spade and not just squarely blame a so-called failed platform for a franchise's declining popularity. The only other major system *Resident Evil* has been on is the Dreamcast. I have all four 128-bit systems in my house, and I'll tell you my GameCube doesn't plan on failing anytime soon.
_Chith

Ah, the uncompromising Chith: We laud you for championing the GameCube in ways that even Nintendo has not. But do be careful not to let love cloud logic. Mr. Davison was simply making the case that *Resident Evil* would probably be more successful on the PS2—which makes sense given that PS2s outnumber GameCubes by, oh, five to one (~30 million vs. ~6 million, respectively, and that's just in the States).

All *Resident Evil* fans should check

MESSAGE BOARD JUNKIES

In light of this issue's review of Nintendo's new handheld wonder and its accompanying games (see page 108), we couldn't help but notice this timely thread titled "Tengo DS...WOOT!" It appears that some of our message board mavens purchased the DS without hearing what we had to say about it first. Hmm, maybe it's time to switch to a daily format.

I found one at Kmart (they actually had two). I got *Mario* with it...needless to say it kicks ass...
_LuigiSunshine

Feh. Call me crazy, but I refuse to get a DS until a game I actually want to play comes out for it. So that's probably either *WarioWare* or *Advance Wars DS*.
_Kris_P

I also considered that, but I figured why not get one now if I'll need it when *AW* comes out....
_LuigiSunshine

I found one today, too. I also picked up *Mario*. That game is awesome, but it gets so hard to play without the control stick.
_you are better than

I got mine and bought *Super Mario 64 DS* and *Feel The Magic: XY/XX*. It is great but still doesn't compare to *Advance Wars*.
_Skett

Tengo DS?
_ViewtifulSean

out our exclusive review of *Resident Evil 4* in this very issue (page 81). Executive Editor James Mielke's been playing the crap out of it—and he's had the crap scared out of him along the way. Yeah, messy, but it's a *good* messy.

REMEDIAL MATH

You say your average reader is 21. How do you know? I'm 15, and my friend, Scott, is 17. It seems the average age starts here.
_Kunoichi

Actually, *GMR*'s average reader is 24 years old. You'll recall in math class that the average is derived from adding



→ GMR's average reader.

up all the numbers and dividing that by the number of numbers. For example: Frodo is 14, Mr. Driller is 29, Mario is 18, and Samus is 42. Add all these up and you get 103, then divide this by 4. The answer is 25.75. The rounded average is 26.

***GMR* derives its average reader age from the numerous surveys we've compiled since we started two years ago. Yes, many of our readers are younger than 24. Many of our readers are older than 24. You're 15 and Scott is 17. Your average age is 16. That would put you both well below our average age. Then again, all *GMR* readers are well *above* average. Awww.**

IT'S JUST YOU

Is it just me, or are the ads for the Nintendo DS getting weirder and weirder?
_3W

MODEL READER

What is the model number of the headphone set on page 136 of the January 2005 issue (#24). Where can I find them for sale?
_Stuart Hamilton

Why, that's none other than the Pioneer SE-XB1 Dolby Digital Surround Headphones for Xbox. We found it at www.audiocubes.com for a very attractive $459. Of course, you should shop around for the best price.

COTY

There can be no doubt: This is the year of the Xbox.

There were the detractors of *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*. Yeah, the name reeks of *Escape from L.A.*, but given how little hype this game got, I was dumbfounded by how much I loved it. I've always looked down on Vin Diesel, but this game actually convinced me to check out some his films, and I was surprised yet again.

There were also detractors who moaned about *Fable*'s controls, when in fact, *Fable*'s control system is intuitively designed for rapid play-shift between melee and magic while on the move. They called the narrator "boring" and labeled the story "hokey," but *Fable*'s comic styling is one of its more cultured aspects, along with the orchestrated score. Playing *Fable* with that music is just epic, especially when you load the Chapel of Skorm area for the first time. That map's design is eerie enough, but



→ Xbox finally gets its props.

when the music starts, your skin crawls.

And now there's *Halo 2*: the finest, most advanced shooter to hit the console market in history, and that's coming from a *Counter-Strike* player who will always prefer mouse-and-keyboard over analog stick.
_Stuart Hamilton

And not to mention *Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II* and about a dozen other awesome games. Indeed it has been an extraordinary year for the Xbox, as it has been for gaming in general. Everyone should check out our Monster Games of 2005 feature (page 44) to see if this year is going to be as great as 2004.

SOMEONE CALL A WAAAMBULANCE

I'm a *GMR* subscriber. I play Xbox and have Live. I play a lot of FPSes and also have *Fable*. I play some MMORPGs like *FFXI* (honestly, my favorite section in *GMR* is "My Life in Vana'diel"). What I'm writing about is, I'm 13. A lot of insults or jokes in your articles are directed toward my age group and also infer that kids my age shouldn't be reading your magazine or at least shouldn't be able to handle it because of pretty girls in swimsuits and the occasional "ass" or "damn." Also, I believe in a *Halo 2* article, you said all 12-year-olds (close enough to my age) "are antisocial and torture their moms with the robot voice." I'm not angry or anything, and overall I think *GMR* is pretty cool, but where do you get these stereotypes? Are you taking this from firsthand experience when you were a child? No matter; it's kind of offensive to me, and I'm trying not to sound angry, but should I cancel my subscription since it's "inappropriate" for my age group (still not trying to sound angry, because I'm not)?
_Andrew

Andrew, chill! At *GMR* we have what is commonly referred to as a "sense of humor," and sure, once in a while we'll make gross generalizations just to get a point, or a joke, across. Of course, we

I picked mine up the other day and I have to say, that *Mario* game ain't half bad. I'm a little disappointed with the wireless multiplayer range. Nintendo could have made it a lot bigger, or online, but I guess they like to keep things simple and costs down. It'd be cool if it had an Xbox Live-like system, but that would shoot up costs. Till then, I'm waiting for this baby's killer app and gonna find me some stars!

_Badguy

Tengo DS = I have a DS. Simple Spanish...
_LuigiSunshine

Why the Spanish?
Yo no tengo un DS.
_ViewtifulSean

Yo quiero un DS, pero yo no tengo dinero.

_dustinmyles

I use Spanish anytime I get something related to videogames that not many other people have.
_LuigiSunshine



don't really always mean what we say, and to all our 12-year-old readers, we apologize if we have offended you. Now take those thumbs out of your mouths and run home to your mommies. (Yes, that's a joke!)

AAAE AARE FAN

I would like to make a comment about Greg Orlando's Xbox column on page 36 of *GMR* #24. His main point was Microsoft's purchase of Rare was a mistake. In my opinion, Rare is an awesome company with high-quality games. I can't think of a Rare-produced game I've played that I didn't enjoy. Even though they take forever to release their games, it is well worth the wait. The company cost $375 million dollars, but in the end, Microsoft will end up making money from them. *Conker: Live & Reloaded* will sell a lot, and I even know people who are going to purchase an Xbox just for the purpose of owning that game. The life of the Xbox is almost up, but Xbox Next will still have Rare on its side, grossing in the money. In the short run, Microsoft was ripped off, but in the long run, Microsoft will have the last laugh.
_Morpha613

SHAWN AND DAPHNE DESERVE THE NOBEL

Have you heard? Videogames are good for you. There were studies conducted by Shawn Green and Daphne Bavelier that prove it. Their studies show that people who play shoot-em-ups have better vision and can see detail better than most. And even playing RPGs like *Final Fantasy X* can improve color vision. Not only that, but the brain's nerve cells actually shift their shape when a person plays [a game] so the nerves can communicate better, meaning the person becomes a better thinker, too. So now, we the people [gamers, that is] not only have a valid excuse to play to our hearts' content, but can better defend ourselves against those who would try to stop us. Ho-ah!!
_Mindy Moo

WE COULDN'T HAVE SAID IT BETTER

I have a problem with kids complaining about not being able to play the latest and greatest games because they are M rated. Believe it or not, I am an adult who still plays the latest and greatest, but they aren't M-rated games. I play games like *Katamari Damacy* and *Alien Hominid*. I reserved and waited for months for games like *Tales of Symphonia* and *Phantom Brave*. They aren't M rated, yet they provide me with as much fun as I could ever want. Hell. The one game I truly want for Christmas is *Growlanser Generations*. The truth is: I've played all those M-rated games you kids drool over, but the games that I actually spend money on are games that are actually fun to play. And no shock factor or marketing gimmicks can ever replace that.
_John



→ *Conker Live & Reloaded*: Xbox's savior.

NOW THEY HAVE

Have you seen the V-Smile commercial? It claims to be the first educational videogame system. I guess they have never heard of the Sega Pico.
_Jared Thorbahn


→The Sega Pico

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CGA TAT TGA



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ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL MCCARTHY

BREAKING THE GAMEMAKERS

AS GAMES GET BIGGER, THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE THEM GET BURNT OUT

U.S.A.

As anyone who's worked in game development knows, the hours are brutal and the job can be thankless. Of course, most of us don't make the games—we just play them. But what goes into making a game isn't irrelevant because it's tucked behind the scenes. Don't assume that just because games are fun to play, they're fun to make.

Sure, it's a creative job—and a rewarding one. But Electronic Arts, the biggest name in the business, was recently hit with a class-action lawsuit by employee Jamie Kirschenbaum, claiming that its workers are owed back pay for extensive overtime. While the case has yet to go to trial, cracks in the wall of silence about working conditions in the industry have begun to appear.

Soon after the trial became public, an anonymous Internet poster called ea_spouse let loose a lengthy screed against the company's policies—alleging her husband routinely works 90-hour weeks. Addressing EA management, she rails: "You do realize what you're doing to your people, right? And you do realize that they ARE people, with physical limits, emotional lives, and families, right?" The good news: In response to these pressures, EA management issued a memo to all staff promising change in 2005.

In the old days, when entire games took six months, occasional overwork was no big deal. Now "crunch," as it's known, can extend that long just by itself. In these days of huge publishing corporations and massive teams, it's much less likely that individual developers will strike it rich in royalty payments—destroying the carrot in front of the donkey. If the rewards no longer exist, why should talented developers keep their noses to the grindstone?

According to an analysis by the International Game Developers Association, "[Game development] is all too often performed in crippling conditions that make it hard to sustain quality of life and lead too many senior developers to leave the industry before they have had time to perform their best work." The problem is much larger than EA; it's almost everywhere. But that doesn't make it OK. According to IGDA's recent open letter, the low overall quality of working conditions is "severely crippling" the industry, and the group is "deeply disturbed."

IGDA's statements reveal the reason gamers should be concerned: talent. Talented people make good games. When their talents are crushed by pervasive overwork, it results in games that are less than they could have been. Flip to the reviews section. Do you think developers want to make games that end up scoring 4 out of 10? If they could think straight, they just might avoid it.

CUBE '05

TWO MORE FROM NINTENDO

JAPAN

Nintendo has added two new games to its already promising 2005 lineup. Joining imminent hits like *The Legend of Zelda*, *Star Fox: Assault*, and *Fire Emblem* are a new *Kirby* adventure and *Mario Baseball*. While close Nintendo partner Camelot is the usual go-to developer for Nintendo's *Mario* sports titles, this time Namco is at bat—its long history with the *Family Stadium* series, known in North America as *RBI Baseball* back in the NES days, was likely the deciding factor.









GORE TOY

JIGSAW ZOMBIES IN STYLE

U.S.A.

Whether it's the *Onimusha 3* Soul Controller or *Steel Battalion*'s rugged battle setup, Capcom seems to relish gimmicky controllers.

But few have had the visceral appeal of Nuby's *Resident Evil 4* chain saw, which ships alongside the game in February. Featuring realistic blood splatters (which offset its, well, slight cuteness) and a glob of glistening brain matter on the stand, it's sure to liven up any *RE4* session—for a mere $49.99.



GAMEPORT VITAL GAME INFO. NOW BOARDING...

ARRIVALS COMING SOON

SYSTEM	ETA	TITLE	HOW HOT?
PS2	JAN	**THE GETAWAY: BLACK MONDAY** London as it's meant to be seen: unobscured by health bars.	4
XB	JAN	**OOOWORLD STRANGER'S WRATH** Shooting furballs at stimeballs.	5
GC	JAN	**RESIDENT EVIL 4** The one on the cover of the magazine. Duh.	5
PS2	FEB	**XENOSAGA EPISODE II** Required playing for gaming theology 101.	4
PS2/XB	FEB	**WINNING ELEVEN 8** The reigning world soccer champ reappears.	3
PS2	FEB	**DEATH BY DEGREES** *Tekken*'s Nina gets feisty on her own.	4
PS2	FEB	**SHADOW OF ROME** Your own home decapitation kit.	3
GC/PS2/XB	FEB	**NBA STREET V3** Take it back to the street.	5
PS2	FEB	**CHAMPIONS: RETURN TO ARMS** Back online with the hacky and the slashy.	4
PS2	FEB	**SEGA CLASSICS COLLECTION** $20 for a bunch of remakes that cost beaucoup bucks in Japan.	3
XB	FEB	**FORZA MOTORSPORT** Time to see if MS can out-*Turismo* Sony.	3
OS	FEB	**WARIOWARE TOUCHED!** The system's first killer app arrives.	5
GC	FEB	**STAR FOX: ASSAULT** The fur flies this February.	4
PS2	MAR	**SHINING TEARS** Good or evil, who cares? Wreak havoc.	4
PS2	MAR	**DEVIL MAY CRY 3: DANTE'S AWAKENING** The man is back, with bro in tow.	4
PS2/XB	MAR	**DARKWATCH** Shoot the dead before they rise again.	4

DEPARTURES OUT NOW

SYSTEM	TITLE	GMR SCORE
PS2	**ACE COMBAT 5: THE UNSUNG WAR** Massive flight controller optional	8/10
GC	**BATEN KAITOS** Graphics, beautiful. Characters...what characters?	6/10
PS2	**CAPCOM FIGHTING EVOLUTION** "Evolution"? What happened to truth in advertising?	3/10
GBA	**FINAL FANTASY I & II: DAWN OF SOULS** Few better RPGs on the go exist.	9/10
PS2	**GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS** Too much to do.	9/10
PS2	**GROWLANSER GENERATIONS** Grow...what? No, seriously, check it out.	8/10
XB	**HALO 2** Master Chief, well, he has that name for a reason.	10/10
PS2	**KILLZONE** A few months in the oven could've saved it.	7/10
GBA	**KINGDOM HEARTS: CHAIN OF MEMORIES** Sora, Donald, Goofy, and a rechargeable battery	7/10
PS2	**LORD OF THE RINGS: THE THIRD AGE** Stunt doubles go adventuring.	8/10
GC	**MARIO POWER TENNIS** Smash one down the line.	8/10
PC	**MEDAL OF HONOR: PACIFIC ASSAULT** The Pacific theater finally done right	9/10
PS2	**METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER** Some nights you do feed on a tree frog	10/10
GC	**METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES** Curl up into a ball with this one	9/10
GC/PC/PS2/XB	**PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN** The Prince is back, and he's been listening to Nine Inch Nails	9/10
GC/PS2	**VIEWTIFUL JOE 2** Silvia makes it sweet	8/10

Tekken's Nina Williams is even deadlier undercover.

As a covert operative of the CIA, Nina Williams enters an underground fighting tournament to track Kometa, a shadowy underworld organization. Functioning as the "sweeper" of her cell, Nina finds herself tracking a stolen high-tech weapon through a variety of locations to reveal a conspiracy on a global scale. Nina must now face a multitude of deadly enemies, as well as her own past, in order to save the world.

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XBOX
KNOWLEDGE
THEY KNOW STUFF SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO!



GREG ORLANDO

CHARACTER

It is roughly my 835th hour of stabbing mynocks. The world behind me seems a distant blur, and I think my kidney—judging by the location and intensity of the pain, the left one—has exploded.

In front of me are the noted mynock stabber Thor Foote and his band of raggedy ass-kickers. The homicidal robot wants blood. The handmaiden, I swear, Foote has beaten her down while in his skivvies. We are a dysfunctional family.

Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords has made this excursion possible. But do not misconstrue. I am not doing this to get Freedon Nadd's much-coveted truss or acquire the Force power allowing Foote to jab mynocks with 83 percent greater efficiency. I am here because the game is challenging me. Make a choice, *The Sith Lords* says. Decide. Take this game and make it your own.

PC game developers have long understood what console game creators are just now learning: Players want character. More to the point, they want the ability to create a character and shape him. To choose his—or her—path by making moral decisions. That, at least to my mind, is better than a thousand unlockable costumes.

Greg Orlando is an editor at Xbox Nation.

MIDNIGHT WITH MASTER CHIEF

HALO 2 INSPIRES EB TO OPEN LATE

NORTH AMERICA

November 9, 2004, could very well become a milestone that is remembered for years by the gaming industry. At exactly 12:01 a.m., more than 7,000 EB Games shops across the United States and 700 in Canada opened their doors to sell copies of Bungie's eagerly anticipated *Halo 2* to hundreds of thousands of impatient fans.

To those not in the know, the phenomenon resembled a lineup for the hottest concert act to come to a city or the opening-day line for tickets to *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. But it was for *Halo 2* that these fans had come. Some brought pillows. Others brought tight, sweaty $20 bills.

At some EB locations, Xbox public relations representatives set up portable systems so players waiting in line could have a chance to play the game. But even after months of anticipation, this show of appreciation wasn't enough for some. "I came here to buy," said one fan, "not to play."

Despite the fervor of Xbox fans, many mainstream publications have predicted *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* to be the biggest hit of the year because of its more mainstream appeal. But even San Andreas' hero CJ couldn't have predicted this kind of opposition: First-day sales of *Halo 2* were over 2.4 million, beating the latest *GTA* by a respectable margin.

GMR spoke to some of the fans waiting in line in Calgary, Alberta, Canada for *Halo 2* to get their thoughts. Steve Mitchell, 17, first in line, spent seven and a half hours waiting. Why so long? His simple reply: "It's the best game in the world. I'm buying two copies, the special edition and the regular. I have to have both. I'll probably end up buying another just to frame it."

Gamers who thought they'd dodge the crowds by skipping the midnight sale and showing up at EB locations early were in for a rude awakening. Heather Lynch, a Vancouver EB manager, went in two hours early to make preparations for her store's 8 a.m. opening. But arriving early didn't help. Said Lynch, "The dedicated throngs waiting to get *Halo 2* were already lined up down the mall. At peak traffic time, the wait to reach the counter was about an hour and 20 minutes, during which time our maximum store capacity was violated several times."

After the launch, *GMR* tried to contact some of the fans to get their thoughts on the game. But mysteriously, phones rang unanswered. Second-in-line Dave Duport (who waited only five hours) predicted as much and summed up the entire phenomenon with a grin. "*Halo* is like a religion," he said. And there's little doubt Microsoft is praying for another hit this big.



[LINEMEN] GMA TALKS HALO 2

GMR (to the line in general): Which game will be remembered more: *San Andreas* or *Halo 2*?
Line (simultaneously): *Halo 2*.
GMR: Do you guys have school tomorrow?
Line (simultaneously): I'm not going.
GMR: No sleep for anyone?
Line (simultaneously): No.
GMR: What about work?
Halo Fan A: I've booked a week off. I don't plan on sleeping for quite a while now.
GMR: How many days?
Halo Fan A: At least three or four. As many as I can before I pass out.
GMR: Do you find you think about *Halo* during school?
Halo Fan B: I'm failing physics.



FACTS AND FIGURES

2.4 MILLION
Halo 2 sold in first 24 hours, North America

$125 MILLION
Dollar amount of first-day *Halo 2* sales

$114.8 MILLION
Spider-Man (the film's) record first weekend

OVER 2 MILLION
GTA: San Andreas sold in N.A., Oct. 2004

2.1 MILLION
Dragon Quest VIII sold in Japan, first weekend

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MARK MACDONALD

TRUTH

Let's face it; recent Nintendo coverage in the mainstream press has not been kind. *Metroid Prime 2*'s glowing reviews were drowned out by stories about lines for *Halo 2* or *GTA: San Andreas*' sales.

Many holiday gift guides marginalized the GameCube as "for the kids" or ignored it altogether. Others dismissed it outright. *The Washington Post* called it "clearly obsolete, with a diminishing supply of new titles."

As regular readers of this column well know, I am no Nintendo evangelist. But I can honestly say this: Cube owners, forget what you are hearing in the press—your system still has its best days ahead of it. As always, it will have quality over quantity.

And if history is any guide, Nintendo will support the current hardware up to and beyond its next system launch. Meanwhile, the other guys, and the third parties they rely upon so heavily, are already moving on to the next generation. Want proof? Count all the triple-A Cube titles on the way. The next *Legend of Zelda*, *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat*, a new *Mario* platformer, *Star Fox* (looking much better, by the way), *Mario Baseball*, *Kirby*, and of course, this month's incredible cover star, *Resident Evil 4*. Now do the same for the PS2 and Xbox. I rest my case.

_Mark MacDonald is executive editor at Electronic Gaming Monthly.

[TALENT]

FANTASY GIRL

HEATHER GRAHAM HOLDS COURT

Some call actress Heather Graham a spoiled princess...others, particularly *EverQuest II* fans, call Ms. Graham "her royal majesty" instead. Blame a spirited in-game performance as Qeynos' ruler Antonia Bayle, noble leader and accomplished orator alike. Here, she shares her thoughts on voicing the curvaceous but stately character.

GMR: What's with the cameo...secretly got a fetish for chain mail and 20-sided dice?

HG: It's not that—I'm just very creative. And I always thought the concept of fantasy games was interesting. So many things can happen.

GMR: Did you enjoy the process of recording dialogue for your alter ego?

HG: Frankly, I was shocked with all the things they had for me to do...there were tons of lines! I always thought it would be fun to play a character whose voice was all I had to act out. But let me tell you, the job wasn't easy.

GMR: Any funny stories about the activity you can relate?

HG: I really enjoyed pretending to be Antonia, but most of her commentary is really dense...I felt like a politician during the performance! My character gives a lot of speeches, and I had to put on airs and act like a natural-born leader.

GMR: Tell us—between roles like Rollergirl, Felicity Shagwell, and now Antonia, what's with the sexy-girl shtick?

HG: Sometimes, it's just how you're cast. It's the reason I started my own development company—so I can start playing more normal roles. I certainly don't see myself as anything special. It amazes me that other people do.

GMR: So Antonia's more of a girl next door or lady of ill repute, given your portrayal?

HG: [*Laughs*] I'm not sure she's either. Antonia's pretty serious. She's lived through a lot: wars, catastrophes, her kingdom constantly being threatened, and her people always under attack. She's very proper and altruistic, if anything.

GMR: Something you're hoping audiences take away from the appearance in particular would be....

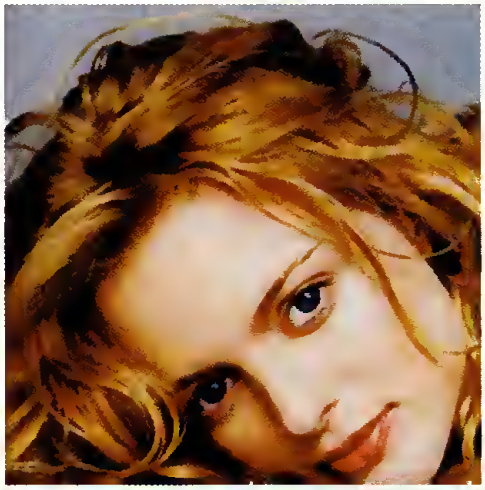
HG: I hope Antonia starts a trend—there need to be more politicians who are as focused on achieving results that benefit people, not just themselves.

GMR: You may have heard *EverQuest* referred to as "*Evercrack*." Agree with the assessment?

HG: Of course. I've been playing *EverQuest* and think it's awesome. Let's put it this way...as soon as I get *EverQuest II*, I'm going to play it. I just hope it doesn't interfere with my work.

GMR: Ever consider dating a dedicated MMO player?

HG: Sure. It's no big deal, unless the guy stops noticing you because he's so obsessed with the game. Then again, if it's *EverQuest II* and you're both addicted, you can always play together....



PLAYSTATION
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JOHN DAVISON

BIG

Aside from the immediately apparent awesomeness of the PSP itself, the thing that really dinged my bell was *Need for Speed Underground Rivals*.

I'd previously been of the opinion that fast-paced 3D games just don't work on handhelds. This wasn't just a pigheaded statement, it was based almost entirely on evidence. While I can appreciate that *Doom II* on the Zodiac is kinda cool, I can't stand playing it.

I've seen plenty of disasters over the years on GBA, Zodiac, N-Gage, and on the Lynx back in the dark ages before half of you were born. The twitchy stuff never worked. Why? I couldn't put my finger on it initially. Now I know...it's the screen.

Lots has been written about how mind-bendingly good the PSP screen is, but it wasn't until I played *NFSUR* for a while that I really understood it. It really is, and more importantly, it's really big. Big enough that it sucks you in to the experience.

It's not like squinting down at your phone. It's a big, wide window into the game that lets your eyes tune out anything else you're looking at. The result is complete and total immersion.

Screw movies and music. The PSP is a kick-ass game machine and already looks like it will be as culturally significant as the iPod.

_John Davison is editor-in-chief of the Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine.


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PC KNOWLEDGE
THEY KNOW STUFF SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO!



JEFF GREEN

STEAMED

On November 16, 2004, I did what a great many PC gamers did with great glee: I tore open my long-awaited boxed copy of *Half-Life 2* and eagerly popped in the first CD. Six hours later, the installation was complete.

Yeah, that's right. Six hours. And boy, was I in a really great mood when that was done. Valve Software, as many of you know, used *Half-Life 2* as the biggest rollout yet of its online downloading service Steam. Like iTunes for music, it lets you avoid getting your fat ass out of the house by downloading complete games right onto your PC. It's a great idea in theory, and, you know, it's probably "the future."

Sadly, however, we're living in the present. And in the present, on November 16, Steam sucked hard. Because even though I didn't download *Half-Life 2*, I was still forced to go online, create a Steam account, and then wait all freakin' day to access their overcrowded servers just to unlock the files to play the single-player game—a punitive, overly high-maintenance ordeal. Add to that the fact that they've made it much harder to sell or give away your copy once you're done, and you have just about the most consumer-hostile system I've ever seen in this business. Oh yeah, and *Half-Life 2* is great.

Jeff Green is editor-in-chief of Computer Gaming World.

GMR CHARTS

IN ASSOCIATION WITH EB GAMES electronics boutique

TOP-SELLING GAMES FOR EVERY SYSTEM FOR NOVEMBER '04

TOP 10 ALL FORMATS

RANK	TITLE	FORMAT	SCORE
01	**HALO 2** And a quadrillion Xbox Live games are launched. Uh, that's just an estimate.	XB	10
02	**GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS** CJ gets Master Chiefed.	PS2	9
03	**NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2** Brooke Burke probably didn't hurt.	PS2	9
04	**METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER** Back in top fighting form.	PS2	10
05	**WORLD OF WARCRAFT** And thousands of social lives breathe their last breath.	PC	TBD
06	**NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2** Don't sniff the nitrous.	XB	9
07	**SUPER MARIO 64 DS** Touch screen? Who needs it?!	DS	9
08	**HALF-LIFE 2** Plus an undisclosed number of Steam installs bought by those afraid of the sun.	PC	10
09	**METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES** If there are no metroids, can you call it *Metroid*? And what's the sound of one hand clapping?	GC	9
10	**GHOST RECON 2** Not quite as genre defining as the rest of the list.	XB	7

PS2 TOP 10

		SCORE
01	GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS	9
02	NFS UNDERGROUND 2	9
03	METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER	10
04	DRAGON BALL Z: BUDOKAI 3	8
05	MADDEN NFL 2005	9
06	CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR	7
07	JAK 3	8
08	WWE SMACKDOWN! VS. RAW	8
09	NBA LIVE 2005	8
10	JAK II	8

XBOX TOP 10

		SCORE
01	HALO 2	10
02	NFS UNDERGROUND 2	9
03	GHOST RECON 2	7
04	CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR	7
05	STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC	10
06	PRINCE OF PERSIA: WARRIOR WITHIN	9
07	ESPN NBA 2K5	8
08	MADDEN NFL 2005	9
09	GREG HASTINGS' TOURNAMENT PAINTBALL	NR
10	GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT	5

PC TOP 10

		SCORE
01	WORLD OF WARCRAFT	TBD
02	HALF-LIFE 2	10
03	EVERQUEST II	TBD
04	VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE—BLOODLINES	7
05	SID MEIER'S PIRATES!	TBD
06	ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON 3	NR
07	DOOM 3	8
08	NFS UNDERGROUND 2	9
09	ROME: TOTAL WAR	9
10	CALL OF DUTY	7

GBA TOP 10

		SCORE
01	FINAL FANTASY I & II: DAWN OF SOULS	9
02	SONIC ADVANCE	NR
03	KIRBY & THE AMAZING MIRROR	7
04	THE INCREDIBLES	NR
05	DONKEY KONG COUNTRY 2	7
06	POKÉMON FIRERED	8
07	POKÉMON LEAFGREEN	8
08	THE SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS MOVIE	NR
09	MARIO PINBALL LAND	5
10	SUPER MARIO BROS.	NR

GC TOP 10

		SCORE
01	METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES	9
02	MARIO POWER TENNIS	8
03	NFS UNDERGROUND 2	9
04	PAPER MARIO: THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR	9
05	SUPER MONKEY BALL	8
06	MADDEN NFL 2005	9
07	BATEN KAITOS	6
08	THE INCREDIBLES	6
09	DONKEY KONGA	7
10	GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT	5

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Sexual Themes
Strong Language

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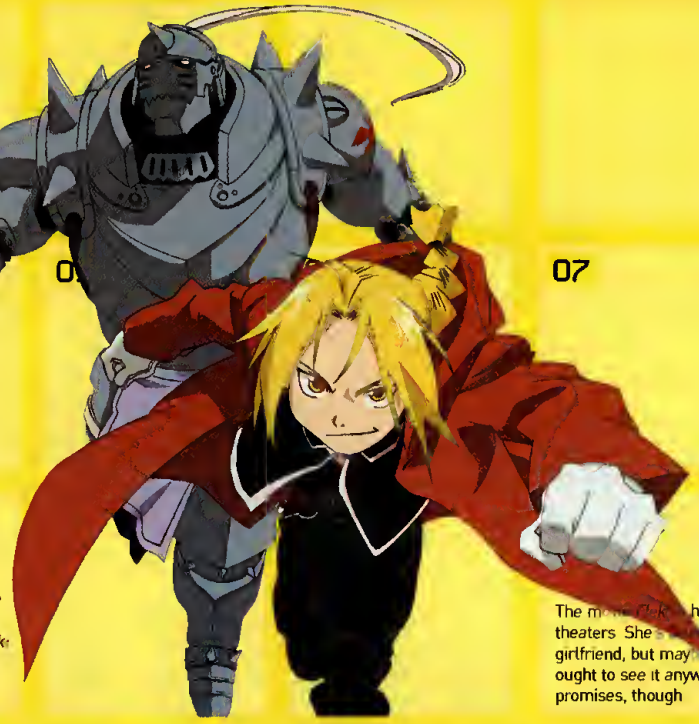
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GAMEPLANNER | JANUARY 2005

ALL RELEASE DATES ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE. SO IT'S NOT OUR FAULT!

NOT TOO MUCH THIS MONTH—BUT TRY THAT STACK OF UNPLAYED 2004 GAMES

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THUASDAY	FRIDAY	SATUADAY
						01
02	03 Start the month off very, very wrong with *Postal 2: Apocalypse Weekend* (PC). Or you could try *Dungeon Lords* (PC) or *Wartime Command: Battle for Europe* (PC).	04	05		07	08
09	10 Try *Top Gear: RPM Tuning* (PS2), *Banjo Pilot* (GBA), *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* (PC), and *The Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap* (GBA). Our money's on *Minish Cap*.	11 *Virtua Ouest* (GC/PS2), *Suikoden IV* (PS2), *Mercenaries* (PS2/XB), *The Getaway: Black Monday* (PS2), *Worms 3D* (XB), *Tork: Prehistoric Punk* (XB), and *GMR* cover boy Leon's *Resident Evil 4* (GC).			The m[illegible] hits theaters. She's [illegible] evil's girlfriend, but may[illegible] u ought to see it anyway. No promises, though	15
16	17 Today, *The Punisher* (PC/PS2/XB) will make you pay for what you've done.	18 *Fullmetal Alchemist and the Broken Angel* (PS2) and *The Matrix Online* (PC) both hit, bringing a bit more life to the month.	19	20	21	22
23 30	24 31	25 Tool around *Midnight Club 3: Dub Edition* (PS2/XB), sex it up with *Playboy: The Mansion* (PC/PS2/XB), and fire furballs in *Oddworld Stranger's Wrath* (XB).	26	27	28 *Alone in the Dark* arrives from incomparable cinematic genius Uwe Boll, who brought us the enduring classic *House of the Dead*. Oh dear.	29




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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
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Suggestive Themes
Violence

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It's that special time of year again, when *GMR* stands high atop the mountains of promise and potential, trainspotting and cherry-picking the best of the best. Some entries warrant their place on the list because they exemplify the best traits a specific genre (like first-person shooters) has to offer. Others earn their notch because they're offbeat, quirky, and just plain cool. Then there are the games that clearly take large strides for gaming, whether it be graphically, sonically, or in terms of sheer, brazen innovation. Videogames are an ever-shifting medium, limited only by budgets and imagination. Games offer experiences we might never otherwise be able to sample in real life, and that's what makes them fun. Whether we're simply breaking the speed limit (by a lot), flying jet fighters, fighting the world's toughest fighters, slaying the dragon, winning the Super Bowl, or venturing boldly where no spiky-haired RPG hero has ventured before, videogames let our inner superstar shine. And to celebrate the inner superstar in all of us, we've pared down all the great games that will hit store shelves this year to let you know which ones we think will have the most lasting impact. These are the monsters of 2005!

WHEN MONSTERS ATTACK!

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDRE SIBAYAN

THE TOP 50 GAMES OF 2005



ACK!

50 VAMPIRE CHRONICLE: THE CHAOS TOWER

MAKING PSP A VIABLE 2D CONTENDER

SYS: PSP PUB: CAPCOM DEV: CAPCOM REL. DATE: DECEMBER 12, 2004 IN JAPAN; U.S. RELEASE UNANNOUNCED

While on the surface, *Vampire Chronicle* seems like one of those quick-job console-to-PSP ports everyone fears will fill up the PSP library, its new single-player game mode and graphics—which pop out so well on the PSP screen that you'd think the system specializes in 2D games—make it a standout. According to the game's producer, Minae Matsukawa, "We really had set a goal to not only bring it into the PSP world, but to make sure the quality—the timing, the frames, everything—is maintained, and then add a couple new things that make it original as well."



MONSTER MAGNET: The new tower mode lets players fight through different challenges on 150 floors of a castle.

48 DONKEY KONG JUNGLE BEAT

JUNGLE BOOGIE

SYS: GC PUB: NINTENDO DEV: NINTENDO REL. DATE: MARCH

Character platformers are as ubiquitous as reality TV shows, but if any company can figure out a way to make one stand out, it's Nintendo.

Jungle Beat's world, characters—and yes, banana collecting—are familiar, but the control makes it all feel brand new. Using the bongo controller, players drum to make Donkey Kong run, jump, fight, and swing on vines.



Jungle Beat provides not only a new outlet for the bongo controller, but also a new challenge for platform fans who adroitly button-press their way through the typical fare. In short, *Jungle Beat*'s uniqueness combined with Nintendo's track record for quality gameplay makes this a must-try game.

MONSTER MAGNET: To make Donkey Kong fight and counter punches, players clap their hands. Unlike the real boxing ring, just yelling won't cut it.

49 COLD FEAR

DARKWORKS' NEWER NIGHTMARE

SYS: PC/PS2/XB PUB: UBISOFT DEV: DARKWORKS REL. DATE: MARCH

Cold Fear marks the notable return of Darkworks to the scene after a four-year absence. Its last—and thus far only—release, *Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare*, offered PS1 gamers one of the system's better horror experiences, and Ubisoft has high hopes for the French developer's latest foray into the genre, which this time emphasizes action over survival. As U.S. Coast Guard officer Tom Hansen, it's your mission to investigate—on a dark and stormy night, no less—a Russian whaling ship drifting aimlessly in the Bering Sea. From there, lots of scary things jump out and attack you. And you shoot at them.



MONSTER MAGNET: Considering Ubisoft's prolific history, it's somewhat surprising that *Cold Fear* is its first horror release.

47 REPUBLIC COMMANDO

UNCLE SIDIOUS WANTS YOU!

SYS: XB PUB: LUCASARTS DEV: LUCASARTS REL. DATE: MARCH

Even though it's taking a little longer than we expected, and considering the hit-or-miss-or-miss-or-miss track record of *Star Wars* games, *Republic Commando* is still piquing interest. The *Jedi Knight* series proved that first person works well for the franchise, and issuing commands to a squadron of A.I. teammates is all the rage these days. And, much like what *Shadows of the Empire* did for the original *Star Wars* trilogy, *Commando* serves as a plot "bridge" between *Episodes II* and *III*. If one is forced to say something good about *Episode II*, the Clone War is definitely the most interesting part.

MONSTER MAGNET: The plot hooks reaching into *Episode III* make a March release good timing.



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46 DARKWATCH

NOT EVEN ANNE RICE COULD HAVE THOUGHT THIS UP

SYS: PS2/XB PUB: SAMMY STUDIOS DEV: SAMMY STUDIOS REL. DATE: SPRING

You have to credit Sammy for originality—for better or worse, it's created the vampire Western. Whether we need such a subgenre remains to be seen, but there's a lot to like about *Darkwatch*. Action centers around Jericho Cross, a half-vampire in league with the vigilant Darkwatch strike force that has secretly defended humanity from suckheads for centuries. Jericho's decisions throughout the game affect how others react to him, as well as his ultimate fate. Ragdoll physics, vampire powers, and a kick-ass arsenal only add to the appeal, just as assault-vehicle and horseback segments further enhance the variety.

MONSTER MAGNET: Along with BloodRayne and *Leisure Suit Larry*'s Luba, *Darkwatch* vixen Tala got nekkid in last October's *Playboy*.



44 DUNGEON SIEGE II

NOW WITH ACTUAL GAMEPLAY!

SYS: PC PUB: MICROSOFT DEV: GAS POWERED GAMES REL. DATE: Q1

Chris Taylor's epic fantasy RPG *Dungeon Siege* was one of the biggest mixed bags of 2002, since it didn't require a whole lot of player interaction. The imminent sequel does a number of things to fix the original's autonomous gameplay: *Dungeon Siege II* introduces a complex branching skill system, a slew of new combat options, and pets that grow and evolve into fearsome, full-fledged party members. Also new is the ability to enchant items, making for dozens of weapon and armor combinations. Finally, the game promises a much more compelling story than its predecessor has and should keep players enraptured for a good 30-plus hours.

MONSTER MAGNET: Award-winning composer Jeremy Soule once again lends his musical talents to a *Dungeon Siege* title.



45 CODED ARMS

FPS + WIDESCREEN = INSANITY

SYS: PSP PUB: KONAMI DEV: KONAMI REL. DATE: U.S. RELEASE UNANNOUNCED

Like the PSP's very own *Killzone*, *Coded Arms* showed up and made a hype-filled splash last year due to its impressive 3D graphics engine...but nobody knew much about the rest of the game. It'll be interesting to see if the gameplay matches the graphics, and if Konami—a company not known for first-person shooters—can pull out a winner in this genre dominated by North American developers. According to the chief officer of Konami's computer and videogames division, Kazumi Kitaue, "I just want to make a project successful in North America and Europe, but I'm rather pessimistic that it will succeed in Japan."

MONSTER MAGNET: Kitaue also claims that PSP is a good testing ground for Konami to try out new genres.



43 ODDWORLD STRANGER'S WRATH

A FAATY, GASSY ADDITION TO THE ACTION GENAE

SYS: XB PUB: ELECTRONIC ARTS DEV: ODDWORLD INHABITANTS REL DATE: JANUARY

Originally an Xbox game developed for Microsoft, *Stranger's Wrath* got dropped, picked up by EA, attached to a PS2 version, separated from the cancelled PS2 version, and moved up to an early 2005 release. Players control Stranger, a rough, humanlike animal cowboy that can roam in third person or shoot animals with his crossbow in first person. "In first person, I can only move up to a maximum of about 15 miles per hour, and that's really like *Halo* speed relative to the scale of the world," says Lorne Lanning, cofounder of developer Oddworld Inhabitants. "In third person, I can get up to 55 miles an hour, but I can't shoot."

MONSTER MAGNET: The story "has some major plot twists that occur as you're playing," says Lanning.



41 RISE OF THE KASAI

RISE FROM YOUR GRAVE. ALL QUIET-LIKE

SYS: PS2 PUB: SCEA DEV: BOTTLEROCKET REL DATE: MARCH

2002's stealth adventure *The Mark of Kri* was so good at sneaking that hardly anyone noticed it. Developer Bottlerocket hopes to net more attention for the sequel by adding a little more darkness to the series' Disney-like aesthetic: You must undo the untimely death of hero Rau with the aid of his slightly evil sister Tati. Each playable character will possess individual talents while the unselected sibling will tag along as a computer-controlled companion. A.I. assistants are nothing new, but they usually show up in run-and-gun games where their limited intelligence is an asset. If *Kasai*'s characters possess the necessary cunning for stealth action, it could be a truly unique experience.

MONSTER MAGNET: The family that slits throats together, stays together.



42 SHINING TEARS

TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE

SYS: PS2 PUB: SEGA DEV: SEGA REL DATE: MARCH

The descendent of Sega's once all-encompassing RPG metaseries, *Shining Tears*' first strike point is its visuals: They look like a watercolor painting come to life.

But more exciting are the characters—for one, they're lavishly illustrated in a tasteful anime style. More interesting, though, is the fact that they come in pairs: Adventures require the hero to be joined by an ally, both controlled simultaneously by the player.

The alignment of your partner affects the hero's attitude and powers—and whom you choose to work with dictates the game's ending. Of course, the customizations RPG buffs would be lost without are here, providing role-playing addiction via level-gaining and combat.

MONSTER MAGNET: This game rekindles the *Shining* series; it's to be followed by a new PS2 *Shining Force*.





40 BROTHERS IN ARMS

ADDING TACTICS TO A WWII SHOOTER

SYS: PC/XB PUB: UBISOFT DEV: GEARBOX SOFTWARE REL. DATE: FEBRUARY

Developer Gearbox isn't known for original titles. Its track record showcases some of the biggest names in the industry—*Halo*, *James Bond*, *Half-Life*—but until now, its focus has been on porting games made by other developers. With *Brothers in Arms*, Gearbox is on its own, creating a World War II tactical shooter that places realism above all else. Players take control of Matt Baker and a team of soldiers as they go through the invasion of Normandy over eight days, using cover and making their way through open fields along the way.



MONSTER MAGNET: *Brothers in Arms*' multiplayer has players controlling three-man teams instead of a single soldier.

38 FREEDOM FORCE VS. THE THIRD REICH

CLOBBERIN' TIME FOR HITLER

SYS: PC PUB: VIVENDI UNIVERSAL DEV: IRRATIONAL GAMES REL. DATE: SPRING

For this sequel to 2002's critically acclaimed *Freedom Force*, expect more of the series' trademark Silver Age send-up style gracing gut-wrenchingly great gameplay—this time with a time-traveling twist! Or for those who don't speak in Stan Lee hyperbole: The Force is heading back in time to World War II to stop a Nazi plot, and they're taking with them a bevy of improvements, including new characters, Golden Age comic pastiches, interior scenes, destructible buildings, and impressive multiplayer options. If you're looking for a comic-style alternative to *City of Heroes* without the monthly fee, *Third Reich* sounds like an uncanny choice.



MONSTER MAGNET: Science has speculated that fighting Nazis is the world's most gratifying form of videogaming.



39 TENCHU: FATAL SHADOWS

THE ALL-FEMALE NINJA STEALTH GAME

SYS: PS2 PUB: SEGA DEV: K2 REL. DATE: FEBRUARY

The *Tenchu* series has fallen off a bit since the original game hit in 1998, with each successive entry missing the polish needed to compete with big-time stealth games like *Metal Gear* and *Splinter Cell*. So for *Fatal Shadows*, there's a new publisher in Sega, the return of the ability to hide enemy bodies, new double stealth-kill attacks with which you can time an attack to take out two enemies simultaneously, and a new character Rin, making both stars of the game female. There is also a larger emphasis on story, with anime cut-scenes, more dialogue, and parallel story lines concerning the two main characters.



MONSTER MAGNET: In order to do a double stealth kill, you have to sneak between two enemy characters.

37 DIGITAL DEVIL SAGA: AVATAR TUNER

HUNGRY FOR CONFLICT

SYS: PS2 PUB: ATLUS DEV: ATLUS REL. DATE: MARCH

Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne demonstrated to gamers what an RPG powerhouse Atlus can be. But if you missed the message, *Digital Devil Saga* should erase any traces of doubt. Forget most of what you know about *Nocturne*, though; *DDS* retains only its impeccable sense of style and speedy battles.

Saga is a more story-driven take on the postapocalyptic devil-summoning the *SMT* series is synonymous with. As a member of a paramilitary group on the fringes of society, you and your cohorts are cursed with the ability to transform into all-devouring demons. You'll have to fight your way out of the slums and attack The Man head on. Savage!

MONSTER MAGNET: Ready for more? *Digital Devil Saga 2* hits Japan shortly before the original *DDS* takes its shelf space here.



36 PROJECT: SNOWBLIND

SPF 1000

SYS: PC/PS2/XB PUB: EIDOS DEV: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS REL. DATE: FEBRUARY

There's no shortage of first-person shooters out there these days, but *Project: Snowblind* should set itself apart. For starters, it promises to be a more thoughtful game than the industry-standard *Halo*-come-latelies, with plenty of customization and skill upgrades to choose from. Even more impressive is the focus on cool weapons: Crystal Dynamics firmly believes that half the fun of a shooter is, well, shooting. To that end, expect a wide variety of unique and interesting guns to keep things lively. Oh, and support for up to 16 players, if you want to use all those skills and weapons to tear apart some friends and loved ones.

MONSTER MAGNET: *Project: Snowblind* began life as a *Deus Ex* spin-off. Expect a bit of brain teasing.



35 ENTHUSIA PROFESSIONAL RACING

SHOULD GRAN TURISMO BE WORRIED?

SYS: PS2 PUB: KONAMI DEV: KONAMI REL. DATE: TBA

Konami may not refer to *Enthusia* as a "*Gran Turismo* killer," but that's pretty much what it'll have to be in order to overcome that game's shadow. As seen through the use of a feature known as the Visual Gravity System (which visualizes G forces), it's obvious this racing sim prides itself on the actual racing experience—the physics, the performance, the motion—as opposed to what's under the hood. At E3, Konami demonstrated the remarkable physics with side-by-side footage of an actual sports car navigating through cones and *Enthusia*'s version of the same car doing the exact same thing. They moved identically.

MONSTER MAGNET: Expect nearly 40 licensed manufacturers in *Enthusia*, meaning hundreds of real-life cars.





STEEE-RIKE THREE!

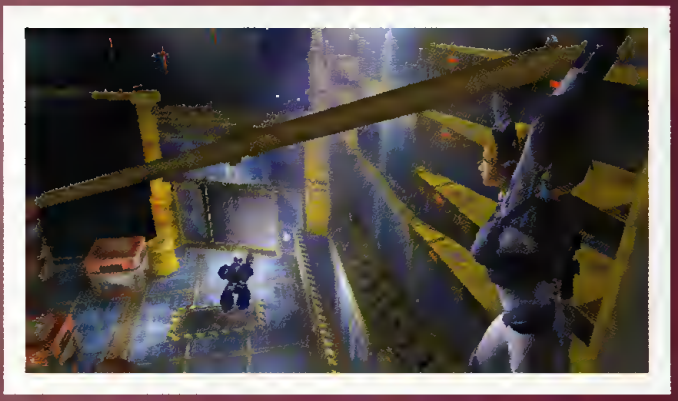
OUT WITH THE OLD AND IN WITH THE NEW

Hey, it happens. Someone gets a little too eager when announcing a release date, publishers totally abandon a game in a time of need, or heck, a comptetely new development team is brought in two years into a project. The videogame industry is definitely a tumultuous one, but if we were to include the following games on our Monster List for 2005, it'd mark their third straight appearance on the annual list. To be honest, the constant delays have dampened our enthusiasm. That's not to say these games won't end up being good, but having them take up spots on the list for another year just didn't seem fair.

PSYCHONAUTS Dropped by Microsoft last year (which is still a head-scratching move, considering the company's near-empty publishing schedule in '05), *Psychonauts* was thankfully picked up by Majesco, which also thought it would be nice to start up work on a PS2 port. The folks at Double Fine are feverishly finishing up the platformer, and the long-awaited release is likely early in the year.



STARCRAFT: GHOST Few companies care about their products as much as Blizzard does, so it's not completely surprising that the developer has been taking its sweet time with *StarCraft: Ghost*. What is surprising is that the company decided to drop the game's development team and bring in Swingin' Ape, known for its sleeper hit *Metal Arms*. What effect such a dramatic move will have on the game remains to be seen, but for Blizzard's sake, it had better be good—it has groomed its fans to expect no less.



THE MOVIES Peter Molyneux has been a busy man (see also: *Fable*), so we can forgive him and Lionhead Studios for dragging their feet a little bit with this promising movie-studio sim. As with all Molyneux-helmed projects, *The Movies* is unique and ambitious in design. Let's hope that Lionhead is using all this time to bring its ideas to full fruition.



KILLER 7 Announced two years ago as part of Capcom's now-dysfunctional GameCube quintilogy, *Killer 7*...hmm...you know what? There's really no good reason why this game isn't out yet. There have been no hands-on demos, nor has there been a conclusive description of how the game actually plays. Despite the striking art style, this does not bode well.



34 ODAMA

TOMMY, CAN YOU HEAR ME? I'M WAGING WAR

SYS: GC PUB: NINTENDO DEV: VIVARIUM REL. DATE: 2005

A strategy-driven, pinball-based war simulator? That's the sort of idea you come up with when you're drunk—or when you're Yoot Saito, the lovable madman who gave us the Dreamcast life sim *Seaman*. Players use giant flippers to bat an enormous metal sphere (the odama) around a battlefield, wiping out enemy forces and defending a troop of friendly soldiers. Meanwhile, both the odama and the opposing forces work to slip past the flippers and damage the "trap," which serves as the player's base. Saito's knack for clever, addictive absurdity is in effect once again, making this an early contender for most original game of the year.



MONSTER MAGNET: Pinball wizards are nothing new, but pinball warriors are a first.

33 DEVIL MAY CRY 3

ADDING STYLES TO ONE OF THE MOST STYLISH GAMES AROUND

SYS: PS2 PUB: CAPCOM DEV: CAPCOM REL. DATE: MARCH

With hesitant player reactions to the second *Devil May Cry*, Capcom decided to go in another direction with *DMC3*, focusing on different fighting styles to mix things up. Players can pick from four different fighting styles at the beginning—which range from the flashy trickster and gunslinger styles to the more technique-driven royal guard style that requires players to know how to play well—and there are two hidden styles in the game as well. Mix in some twists in the story line and more levels than in any previous *DMC*, and hopefully the game will make up for *DMC2*.



MONSTER MAGNET: Players can hold four weapons at a time and switch between them for combos.

32 QUAKE IV

THIS QUAKE COULD BE THE BIG ONE

SYS: PC PUB: ID SOFTWARE DEV: RAVEN SOFTWARE REL. DATE: 2005

Now that Id has restored *Doom* to its place as king of white-knuckled shooters, the company's attention has turned to updating its other landmark series. Not much is known about the fourth *Quake*, but it's in the hands of longtime Id collaborators Raven Software, the capable creators of *Hexen*, *Elite Force*, and *Jedi Outcast*. *Quake IV* will reportedly ditch the third game's arena combat and return the series to its single-player roots, continuing the story of *Quake II*. Perhaps more importantly, it should finally resolve the nagging question of whether the *Doom 3* engine is capable of creating anything but dark, claustrophobic spaces.



MONSTER MAGNET: As the first true-3D shooter series, *Quake* has quite a legacy to uphold.

31 CITY OF VILLAINS

EVIL IS GOOD. EVIL IS THE JOB

SYS: PC PUB: NCSOFT DEV: CRYPTIC REL. DATE: JANUARY

City of Heroes broke the high-fantasy mold for massively multiplayer RPGs by putting gamers in the bright spandex of a comic book superman. But heroes are nothing without evildoers to battle, and an MMO is nothing without player versus player. Conveniently, Cryptic is offering both with the *City of Villains* expansion pack, which allows players to work their way up the ranks of badness. Start as a menial thug and eventually become a truly diabolical supervillain, complete with henchmen and a hidden lair on a volcanic island. Expect clashes with heroes and rival villains alike as you vie for total world domination.



MONSTER MAGNET: PVP was always intended for the series—it just needed some *Villains* to get started.

30 GOD OF WAR

GOD-DAMN!

SYS: PC PUB: NCSOFT DEV: CRYPTIC REL. DATE: JANUARY



Truth be known, the gods of Greek mythology were manipulative a**holes who played their faithful mortal followers like so many puppets. Sony takes this interpretation to its most brutal and exhilarating end in *God of War*. Designed by *Twisted Metal* vet David Jaffe, *God of War* tells the tale of Kratos, an ex-Spartan infantryman possessed by Ares, the god of war. Kratos seeks to rid himself of Ares, who has forced the once-honorable soldier to go on a killing rampage. But to do this, Kratos must find Pandora's box. Yep, *that* Pandora's box.

With double chain-blade weapons, horrific sea monsters, dozens of undead enemies, awesome combos, special god powers, and more blood and remorseless killing than an Oliver Stone film, you have what may emerge as the best third-person action title of '05.

MONSTER MAGNET: In Greek mythology, Ares fathered twin sons named Phobos and Deimos, which mean "panic" and "fear," respectively.

29 METAL GEAR ACID

GEAR UP FOR SOME TACTICAL CARD-PLAYING ACTION

SYS: PSP PUB: KONAMI DEV: KONAMI REL. DATE: 2005

You could go a lifetime without ever wondering how the tense action of *Metal Gear Solid* could possibly translate into a card game, but Konami plans to address the question anyway with Solid Snake's PSP debut. *Acid* plays out like a turn-based version of its console brothers, with cards representing the series' standard weapons and actions. Flattening against surfaces, crawling through ducts, distracting guards by knocking on walls, and sticking to the shadows: Fans will need to adjust a bit to the mechanics, but the end results should feel familiar. The card dynamics actually add to the tension. Being spotted is deadlier than ever, so keeping out of sight is essential. There's even a codec, because the *MGS* experience wouldn't be complete without lengthy conversations.

MONSTER MAGNET: Producer Masahiro Hinami's love for board games might explain *Acid*'s unusual style.



QUESTION MARKS

GAMES THAT COULD BE BIG

While 2005 may be rife with *Zeldas*, *Final Fantasys*, and other big-name titles, there are plenty of upcoming games operating under the radar. We might not know as much about these games yet, but they've got our attention nonetheless.

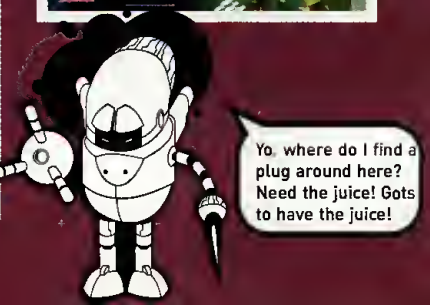
Diablo III is at the top of this nebulous list. All we can say for certain is that it's coming—and now that *World of WarCraft* is a done deal, we're bound to hear more about Blizzard's next project sooner rather than later. Speaking of sequels, Lara Croft's next big *Tomb Raider* adventure is also on its way, although *Soul Reaver* and *Gex* developer Crystal Dynamics is now on the project, having taken over for Core Design; expect to hear more about this one post-E3. Shooter junkies will also be pleased to know that Epic is hard at work on *Unreal 3*, which will boast another sleek graphics engine and the latest in fancy-schmancy futuristic weaponry.

Licensed properties have been hitting it big for the past couple of years, and it looks like that won't be changing anytime soon. Rockstar's adaptation of the cult-classic gang movie *The Warriors* is due out for PS2 in March, while the tie-in game for the final *Star Wars* film, *Revenge of the Sith*, releases consolewide in May from LucasArts. Further down the road, you can also look forward to a small-screen adaptation of *The Godfather* courtesy of EA and a new *Spider-Man* game from Activision—and this time, it's based on the *Ultimate Spider-Man* comic.

Tabula Rasa, the massively multiplayer brainchild of *Ultima* creator Richard Garriott, also makes our list of games to watch...especially after publisher NCsoft's runaway success with its most recent MMO, *City of Heroes*. Finally—and perhaps most intriguingly—the Team Ninja folks over at Tecmo are hard at work on a mysterious Nintendo DS project. Could bikinis and volleyballs be in our handheld future? Probably not.







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STATE OF PLAY

GMR **puts its finger on the pulse of the four major hardware players and determines which systems need to take their vitamins in '05.**

PLAYSTATION 2

GMR REMEMBERS 2004

Although the PS2 never faded from sight, the system went through a bit of a lull in the middle of 2004. It ended up strong, however, thanks to PS2-exclusive titles like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and *Metal Gear Solid 3*, as well as a major hardware redesign for the system. Plus, third-party publishers knew where their bread was buttered, especially Electronic Arts, which cranked out a ton of great multiplatform titles like *Def Jam Fight for NY*, *Need for Speed Underground 2*, and, of course, the newest *Madden*.

GMR PREDICTS 2005

Expect a lot of sequels and third-party software to make up the majority of the PS2's 2005 library. With companies saving their big guns for the next-gen systems, not as many triple-A titles will be released for the PS2 from here on out. Of course, you can't count out games like *Gran Turismo 4* (it's still not out), *Final Fantasy XII*, and many of the other games found in this feature. For the most part, though, publishers will merely hold the fort until the advent of the PS3. Only then will the big names make their appearance.

GAMECUBE

GMR REMEMBERS 2004

The most significant GameCube support came from, once again, Nintendo, highlighting its ever-present problem of simply not having enough titles to sustain enthusiasm. Despite a strong first quarter, Cube support trickled to a drip in the latter half of 2004, making things significantly easier for Sony, and more specifically Microsoft, which happily snapped up second place despite a strong finish from Nintendo courtesy of *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*. *Pikmin 2* offered innovation, but most people don't want to play with plants.

GMR PREDICTS 2005

While more than a few high-quality games are currently in the cooker (see: this feature for a bunch of them), third-party support is on the wane, making Nintendo's job tougher and accelerating the need for the company to come out strong with its next hardware, code-named Revolution. It's a shame, because as this month's cover star *Resident Evil 4* suggests, the GameCube is an excellent piece of hardware that never garnered the support it deserved. Still, with a great library full of triple-A titles, the Cube is a great purchase.

XBOX

GMR REMEMBERS 2004

While the Xbox never really threatened the PS2's dominance, it did manage to distance itself from the eternally scrappy Nintendo—always nipping at its heels—with a steadier stream of titles than its cubish competition. A strong third-party lineup from the likes of Tecmo (*Ninja Gaiden*), Ubisoft (*Ghost Recon*), and Vivendi (*Riddick*), as well as first-party monsters like *Halo 2*, kept the Xbox in the running. One of the keys behind the Xbox's success in 2004 was the ongoing evolution of its Xbox Live gaming service.

GMR PREDICTS 2005

The big problem for Microsoft is that by the time the Xbox really got cookin', it was already time for Xbox 2. Rumored to hit in the tail end of 2005, Xbox 2 and its looming release spell doom for most first-party titles on Xbox (*Forza*? Whatever), especially with the cancellation of games like *True Fantasy Live Online*. Still, savvy publishers like Majesco grabbed *Phantom Dust* and *Psychonauts*, so not all hope is lost. And third-party games will continue to trickle out in a steady stream until the Xbox's big brother is ready to make its mark.

PC

GMR REMEMBERS 2004

That grand old lady known as the PC had a watershed year. It's hard to knock 2004 when games like *City of Heroes*, *EverQuest II*, *The Sims 2*, *Doom 3*, *Half-Life 2*, *Warhammer 40K*, and all those crazy strategy games came out. It's enough to make your head spin. Plus, great gaming PCs got faster, cheaper, and smaller, while accessories and sound systems got better (see: Creative GigaWorks), and that's exactly what the platform needs to compete with the increasingly technical prowess of today's videogame consoles.

GMR PREDICTS 2005

The future is so bright that you might as well wear shades, as highly anticipated titles like *Civ IV*, *Age of Empires III*, *Battlefield 2*, *Dungeon Siege II*, *BioShock*, and even *Psychonauts* are due out in 2005. Of course, the immense popularity of *World of WarCraft* will no doubt spawn an expansion at some point, and then there's all that talk about a little game called *Diablo III*. If that's not enough, let's give a shout out to *Quake IV*, *Unreal 3*, and for playing as the bad guys in *City of Villains*. The PC is set to have a banner year, and we're looking forward to it.

You're racing against time.





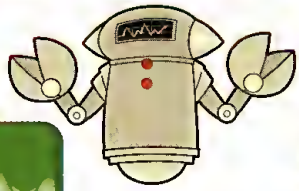
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28 RIDGE RACERS

BIG WHERE IT COUNTS

SYS: PSP PUB: NAMCO HOMETEK DEV: NAMCO LTD. REL DATE: MARCH

Although it's a handheld title, *Ridge Racers* for PSP is, surprisingly, the biggest version of Namco's reputable arcade-racing franchise to date.

The game's 24 courses (the most of any *Ridge Racer* released) include many upgraded versions from past titles, as you'll see behind the wheel of one of 58 new cars. Beautiful graphics light up the PSP's 16:9 screen with blazing speed, cool blur effects for nitrous blasts, and beautiful, ambient scenery. *Ridge Racer*'s trademark spot-on controls return as well, arguably utilizing the PSP's cute little nub of an analog stick better than anything else shown at last fall's Tokyo Game Show. It appears that EA's *Need for Speed Underground Rivals* has a serious rival of its own.



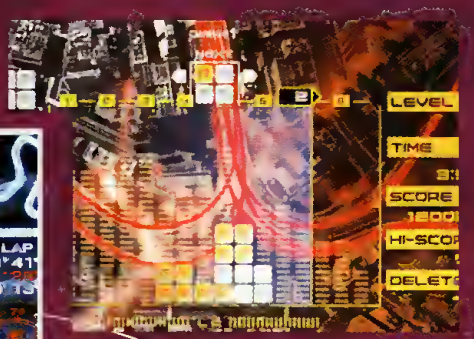
MONSTER MAGNET: If Namco had stuck with this game's TGS title, we'd be calling it *New Ridge Racer*. Thanks the lawd for change.

26 LUMINES AND METEOS

BOTH FUNKY AND FRESH

SYS: PSP/DS PUB: QB (JAPAN) DEV: Q? ENTERTAINMENT REL DATE: 2005

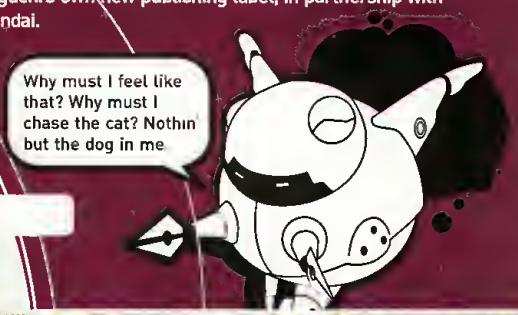
Game auteur Tetsuya Mizuguchi's fascination with the interplay of music and visuals has once again resulted in a unique game wrapped in an easy-to-understand skin. As his *Rez* reinvented the shooter for club kids, *Lumines* is *Tetris* for the 21st century.



Backed by thumping music courtesy of PSP's shiny little UMD disc and stereo speakers, you'll clear rows of blocks in time to the beat. Like any good puzzler, the method is simplistic but the result is addictive.

To keep balance in the handheld wars, Mizuguchi has roped in veteran designer Masahiro Sakurai, the creator of *Kirby*, for *Meteos*. Instead of a bass beat, the Nintendo DS' dual screens power its new twist on the puzzle genre. One thing's the same, though: Both games look like handheld must-buys.

MONSTER MAGNET: In Japan, these games come from QB, Mizuguchi's own new publishing label, in partnership with Bandai.



27 METROID PRIME: HUNTERS

WITH THIS STYLUS I SHALL DESTROY THEE

SYS: DS PUB: NINTENDO DEV: NST REL DATE: MAY

"*Metroid* will never work as a first-person game," they said. "*Metroid*? With a multiplayer mode? That doesn't make sense," they said. "*Metroid*? With multiplayer, on a dual-screen handheld with touch sensitivity and wireless play for up to 16 players?" They didn't say that, but only because THEIR HEADS JUST EXPLODED. Like it or not, *Metroid* is now a fully realized multiplayer experience, and barring any surprises, could be the first real killer app for the DS.

When it debuted at last year's E3, immediate concerns were raised about the awkward control scheme. But now that NST has revamped the setup and actually allowed for multiple methods, it's easier to get excited about playing the final package. That, and it looks like an only slightly watered-down *Metroid Prime* (a very good thing).

MONSTER MAGNET: Though it would seem that the DS supports Wi-Fi online play, Nintendo still hasn't announced any official support. Why not lead the way with *Hunters*?



25 DESTROY ALL HUMANS

THE BIGGEST THREAT TO EARTH IS YOU

SYS: PC/PS2/XB PUB: THQ DEV: PANDEMIC STUDIOS REL. DATE: Q1

Fresh from the well-received *Star Wars Battlefront*, Pandemic Studios takes the action back to our own world in this parody of corny sci-fi flicks from the '50s and '60s. Yet it still has you playing as a being from a galaxy far, far away. In this case, you're Crypto, a little green man with one simple objective: *Destroy All Humans!*

Grand Theft Auto–style freedom allows Crypto to annihilate humanity in a nonlinear fashion, on the ground or aboard his UFO, through five huge environments. Clearing the way for his Furon race's impeding invasion offers choices in methodology as well: Is all-out disintegration your thing? Or will you infiltrate the human race through use of hypnosis, body snatching, and telepathy, abducting humans and animals for research? You know...so they can be probed.



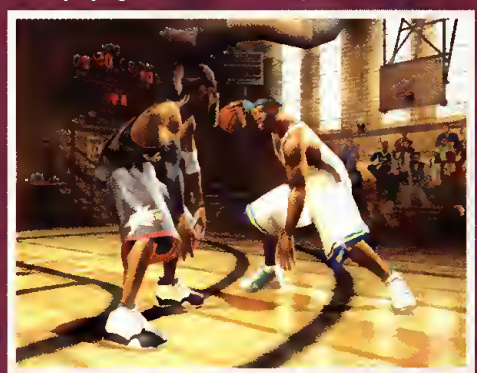
MONSTER MAGNET: The alien's actual name is Cryptosprodium 137. But his friends call him Crypto. You can, too.

24 NBA STREET V3

THE NOT-QUITE-ANNUAL STREET-BALL GAME

SYS: GC/PS2/XB PUB: ELECTRONIC ARTS DEV: ELECTRONIC ARTS REL. DATE: Q1

While many of EA's sports games pull together a nice graphics engine and then milk it for the next few years until something better comes along, the *NBA Street* series doesn't fit that profile. *Vol. 2* was a huge improvement over the original, and *V3* looks to be pushing things ever further with a focus on athletic characters and new environments. Like *Vol. 2*, the game will continue to celebrate famous players from the past instead of displaying the more modern spin seen in games like Midway's *NBA Ballers*. Most importantly, though, *V3* will be playable online, which is not only a first for the series, but also a first for street-focused basketball games in general.



MONSTER MAGNET: Though the details are still secret, the developers promise something special and unique from the game's online options.

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23 NARUTO: NARULTIMATE HERO

THERE'S A NEW ORANGE DYNAMO IN TOWN

SYS: PS2 PUB: TBD DEV: CYBER CONNECT REL. DATE: FALL

Kakashi, Sasuke, Sakura, Gaara, Hokage. All these names may be unfamiliar to you, but the only one you need to know is "Naruto." Based on Shonen Jump's newest manga series, *Naruto: Narultimate Hero* is finally on its way to the States and may include not just one, but both of the exceptional *Super Smash Bros.*-style beat-em-ups currently released on PS2 in Japan. Extraordinarily popular in the land of its origin, *Naruto* is poised to become bigger than *Dragon Ball* in North America, too, and with good reason: It features an exceptionally well-developed cast of characters and a dramatic ninja university setting. With cel-shaded graphics to die for, robust action, and an enormous roster of diverse characters, *Naruto* is quite possibly the next big thing.



MONSTER MAGNET: Boasting a plot that's both genuinely moving and outright exciting, the PS2 games capture the essence of the manga series with aplomb. *Naruto* will be massive.

22 STUBBS THE ZOMBIE

GET DEAD

SYS: MAC/PC/XB PUB: ASPYR MEDIA DEV: WIDELOAD REL. DATE: SUMMER

Would you quit Bungie Studios, the developer behind *Halo*? Founder Alex Seropian did—and now he's struck out on his own with *Stubbs the Zombie*. As the game is backed up by the technology behind *Halo* and an irrepressibly off-kilter sense of humor, things could be much, much worse.

The game stars Stubbs, an undead miscreant who's awakened by the building of a (circa 1959) futuristic city on his grave. This brand-new, gleaming town will end up utterly decimated by the end of the game; it's your job, as Stubbs, to infect the residents with undead flavor and bring life to a halt. Using gut-bombs, a thirst for human brains, possession, and an ever-increasing army of shambling undead minions, it should be a piece of cake.



MONSTER MAGNET: *Stubbs*' soundtrack is by smoking hot indie artists such as The Flaming Lips and Death Cab for Cutie.

21 WARIOWARE TOUCHED!

PSP CAN'T TOUCH THIS

SYS: DS PUB: NINTENDO DEV: NINTENDO REL. DATE: FEBRUARY

WarioWare Touched! is a game that every DS owner must buy. Not only is it just as addictive as the other *WarioWare* games, but it shows off the DS' unique qualities more than any other title. While the game retains aesthetics from its previous incarnations, every one of the 180 microgames in *Touched!* uses the touch screen or built-in mic.

As before, part of the challenge is figuring out the required action before your five seconds are up. One second you've got to blow on the mic to bring a diver to the surface; the next, you have to tap moths camouflaged on tree bark to get them to fly away. At times, you've got to train your eyes on both screens, too. Weird and rad.



MONSTER MAGNET: Slicing, dragging, tapping, tracing: The stylus is used in every conceivable way.



FINAL FANTASY FOREVER

WHEN YOU'RE A JET YOU'RE A JET

In 2005, Square Enix will have its busiest year ever. Its premier series *Final Fantasy* leads the charge. Three new portable editions of the game are in the cooker, on top of PS2's *Final Fantasy XII*—as well as Square Enix's very full slate of non-*FF* projects.

For the Nintendo DS, Square Enix is currently producing two installments of the popular series. *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles* will continue the adventure started on the GameCube. 1990's *Final Fantasy III*, more excitingly, will be released in English for the first time.

This is a different game than the *Final Fantasy III* that hit the SNES in the United States (that's actually No. 6). It's an adventure following four brothers and was the first game in the series to feature the job system, which reappeared in *Final Fantasy V*, *Tactics*, and *X-2* (as the dressphere system.) Touch-screen functionality and other new tweaks are being added in—ones that are planned to take this NES remake onto the DS with panache.

On the PSP, an original action-RPG under the title *Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core* is in the works. This game is part of the so-called Compilation of *Final Fantasy VII*, which includes the film *Advent Children* and PS2's *Dirge of Cerberus*. While the title and genre are known, that's about it. Square is being unusually secretive about this one.

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RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

20 FIRE EMBLEM

TOTAL TACTICAL PLEASUAE

SYS: GC PUB: NINTENDO DEV: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS REL. DATE: SPRING

Although it took 13 years to bring *Fire Emblem* to the United States—the series hit Japan in 1990—Nintendo is not shying away from it now. *Fire Emblem* for GC is the first full-on console version of the series since the SNES days, and it looks to be worth the long wait.

For those who didn't play the excellent GBA version, don't think that *Fire Emblem* is your average strategy-RPG series. Sure, you move units around and make 'em fight, but the tactics get pretty intense in a very different way from the *Final Fantasy Tactics*–wannabes of the world.

Instead of worrying about troop positioning and abilities, you're encouraged to take advantage of features of the terrain: Ruins, friendly villagers' homes, and forests are a few. Weapons and magic require attention, too. All of this is buoyed by an enjoyably character-driven high fantasy narrative, which should be more exciting on the RPG-dry GC.

MONSTER MAGNET: Nintendo's also planning to put out the latest GBA *Fire Emblem*, recently released in Japan, in North America, later in 2005.





19 DEATH BY DEGREES

THE DEADLIEST CUAVES

PS2 NAMCO NAMCO FEBRUARY

Tekken's badass brainwashed brawling babe (and mother of boxer Steve Fox), Nina, takes center stage (none of those pesky Mishimas hangin' around) in this stylish third-person action game cast in the mold of *Dead to Rights* meets *The Love Boat*. Who can argue against *DBD*'s unique analog-control combat system that sends our heroine careening through stage after stage of bad-guy-beating action while wearing the finest tattered purple leather jumpsuits that Namco can provide? Certainly not us.

Set before the events of the first King of Iron Fist Tournament, *Death by Degrees* finds Nina Williams, in young assassin mode, searching for a missing agent on a luxury cruise liner. This is no mere extension of the Tekken Force mode, though. *Degrees*' graphics engine has been built from the ground up for the PS2, and the quality shows when Ms. Williams uses all manner of weapons, including machine guns, samurai swords, and tonfa clubs, to fend off packs of enemies. High-kickin', back-flippin' action, just the way the boys like it.



MONSTER MAGNET: *Death by Degrees*' developers, a veteran group of Namco programmers, have plans for other games of this nature starring other *Tekken* characters if *Degrees* performs well enough.

18 FINAL FANTASY VII: DIRGE OF CERBERUS

FINAL FANTASY GETS SOME FIREPOWER

SYS: PS2 PUB: SQUARE ENIX DEV: SQUARE ENIX REL. DATE: 2005

There is little doubt that *Final Fantasy VII* is the game most beloved by fans of the series. Square Enix is wisely choosing to reexplore this classic throughout 2005. *Dirge of Cerberus* is still a bit of a surprise, all the same. Instead of an RPG, it's an action game starring everyone's favorite monstrous party member: Vincent Valentine.

Taking place a year after the events in the *Advent Children* film, *Dirge of Cerberus* has Vincent working to combat a mysterious force that's risen up and has begun to attack the populace of Midgar. The game plays out as a third-person shooter; you'll use Vincent's gun to battle the opposition. First-person targeting is also supported for clean shots.

It's not just Vincent who returns; Cait Sith, minus his stuffed moogle, has also shown up. While it's a big departure from the usual *Final Fantasy*, Square Enix's resolve to test new genres is commendable—and exciting.

MONSTER MAGNET: *Cerberus* is part of the "Compilation of *Final Fantasy VII*," which also includes the film *Advent Children*.

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17 DRAGON QUEST VIII

THE TRADITIONALIST REBORN

SYS: PS2 PUB: SQUARE ENIX DEV: ARMOR PROJECT/LEVEL 5 REL. DATE: 2005

The *Dragon Quest* (aka *Dragon Warrior*) series has never had a big impact in America—unless you count all the free copies of the first game Nintendo gave away back in the late '80s.

But *Dragon Quest VIII* should change all that. It sheds the mottled skin of its predecessor and is reborn as one of the most beautiful games on the system, its stunning graphics courtesy of new developer Level 5, the team behind the *Dark Cloud* series.

Gameplay, though, remains ultraconservative. This is the series that originally launched the console RPG boom in Japan, and Square Enix is unwilling to mess with success. The story, about an adventurous young lad and a cursed princess, is engaging in its character despite sounding dull. If Square Enix tweaks the U.S. release to smooth out some archaic roughness, as the rumors have it, we're in for a very serious RPG treat.



MONSTER MAGNET: *DQ8* will be the sixth game in the series to come to the United States; we missed both SNES titles.

16 METAL WOLF CHAOS

CAPTAIN AMERICA IN A CAN

SYS: XB PUB: TBD DEV: FROM SOFTWARE REL. DATE: SPRING

If John Kerry had sidestepped all the debates, the relentless campaigning, and the youth-vote-baiting guitar solos and just strapped himself into the cockpit of a 5-ton mech (called a "powered suit" in *MWC*), the political landscape might have been a very different place. Well, come this spring, Kerry, as well as every Xbox owner out there, can take on the role of the 47th president of the United States of America and kick the asses of not only terrorists and those who would threaten our national security, but of the vice president as well!

This president is known as Michael Wilson, and in the interests of protecting the home front, he takes the proactive approach to handling the nefarious dealings of his rebellious second-in-command, Richard Hawk. Using the graphically impressive *Otogi* engine, *Metal Wolf Chaos* features the same gloriously destructible environments as From Software's groundbreaking action series, while offering a distinctly modern milieu and over-the-top pyrotechnics.

MONSTER MAGNET: The same gamers who were turned off by *Otogi*'s Japan-heavy themes may find *MWC*'s ironic, macho, postmodern take on patriotism just the salve they've been looking for. Blow stuff up real good.



15 PHANTOM DUST

ALL WE ARE IS DUST IN THE WIND

SYS: XB PUB: MAJESCO DEV: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS JAPAN REL. DATE: MARCH

What's Microsoft's deal? First it cancels *True Fantasy Live Online*, then it drops *Psychonauts* and *Phantom Dust* as well? In the case of *Dust*, it passed on one of the most import-friendly Japanese games in recent years, since the entire game is in English. Well, leave it to Majesco to know a good thing when it sees it, bringing *Phantom Dust* to North America this March. Created by the guys responsible for another distinctive series beginning with the letters "P" and "D" (*Panzer Dragoon*), *Phantom Dust* is a stylish action game set in a postapocalyptic future with combatants who wield deadly psychic powers. Imagine *Blade Runner* meets Gaultier and you're well on your way to understanding *Phantom Dust*'s vibe. Featuring over 300 psychic skills to customize your character with and an intuitive control system, *Dust* offers 200-plus missions in which to wield these powers. If that wasn't enough, a wealth of multiplayer options—including one-versus-three and two-versus-two cooperative modes plus free-for-all play—flesh out one of the most complete gaming packages available on Xbox.

MONSTER MAGNET: With megafranchises for Xbox on the back burner until Xbox 2, it's up to more original, niche titles to fill the gaps. *Phantom Dust* is one of those games that demands and deserves your attention.



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14 F.E.A.R.

A GHOST IS BORN

SYS: PC PUB: VIVENDI DEV: MONOLITH REL DATE: 2005

Now that the *Dooms* and the *Half-Lifes* and the *Halos* and the *Metroids* are all out, the next big thing on the FPS horizon is Monolith's *F.E.A.R. F.E.A.R.* (short for "First Encounter Assault and Recon") begins by sending a lone soldier—that's you, naturally—into a high-rise office building overrun by armed malcontents. After a few brief and bloody shotgun battles, it becomes apparent that there are other nefarious forces at work.

Obviously not satisfied with a standard run-and-gun approach (though there's a nifty bullet time effect and...wait for it...first-person jump-kicking), Monolith looks to be taking *F.E.A.R.* in the psychological horror direction of *Silent Hill* and *The Ring*. Lights flicker on and off, revealing a freaky little girl who vanishes as quickly as she appears. A copious amount of blood decorates the interior of the office, while silhouettes glide eerily down the hallway. If Monolith can successfully keep the scare factor fresh throughout the game (ahem, *Doom 3*), it could have a big hit in 2005.

MONSTER MAGNET: Monolith has abandoned its durable Lithtech engine in favor of some brand-new tech.



13 STAR FOX ASSAULT

INOFFENSIVE COMBAT!

SYS: GC PUB: NINTENDO DEV: NAMCO REL DATE: FEBRUARY

The combat shooter is given the cute treatment with anthropomorphic creatures, primarily one Fox McCloud, whose team is out to eradicate a deadly threat to the galaxy. *Star Fox Assault* really pays homage to classic *Star Fox* games on SNES and N64, and fans will feel right at home with the familiar Star Fox team, as well as the controls.

Some missions are fought in the air, with players commanding easily maneuverable Arwings, performing barrel rolls or loops as required. On land, players can run and gun, or hop in the Landmaster tank. Weapons include automatic blasters, sniper rifles, and shoulder-launched rockets. Besides the solo missions, the game includes splitscreen co-op missions with players commanding their own vehicles or with a wingman, as well as four-player head-to-head to see who can get the required number of kills first.

It's fast, fun, and easy to pick up and play—which should hit the GameCube audience just right.

MONSTER MAGNET: *Star Fox Assault* features loads of unlockables, such as the Namco classic shooter *Xevious* for collecting all the silver badges.



12 OKAMI

CRY WOLF

SYS: PS2 PUB: CAPCOM DEV: CLOVER STUDIO REL DATE: FALL

Okami—the newest project from Clover Studio, the folks behind *Viewtiful Joe*—tells the tale of Amaterasu, the legendary Japanese goddess of the sun, as incarnated in the form of a powerful she-wolf, who is tasked with bringing color back to the world. If the premise sounds a little hippie, the gameplay will dispel any such thoughts. A free-roaming 3D action-adventure, *Okami* features art direction that is nothing short of jaw dropping. Using a custom-built graphics engine that renders the graphics in an artful calligraphic style, *Okami*'s world fills up with plant life, butterflies, and other colorful forms of life as Amaterasu gains the faith of her followers. It's an inspired premise that is even more exciting to see in action.

Capcom is, as of the moment, mum on when, or even if, *Okami* will come to the States, but we're betting money that Clover Studio isn't putting all this work into the game for a Japan-only release.

MONSTER MAGNET: Possibly the most distinctive game in our Top 50 list, barring our first-place finisher, *Okami* is a wonder to behold.





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11 NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

WHEN THE FASTEST GO FASTER

SYS: TBD PUB: EA DEV: EA BLACK BOX REL. DATE: WINTER

For the longest time (read: during the PlayStation era), the *Need for Speed* series was caught in a downward spiral of declining quality, relevance, and overall interest, especially with new kid *Gran Turismo* getting all the attention. The series' heyday on the 3DO hardware had long since passed, and *Need for Speed* was no longer the last word in racing.

Then Black Box was the surprising choice to develop what would become the superlative *Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 2* for PS2, heralding the return of cop chases, great graphics, and fast, fast racing. We all know what happened next: *Need for Speed Underground* and its sequel brought the arcade back to racing and custom tuning to the *Fast and the Furious* generation. *Need for Speed* is back.

And now Black Box is set to do it all over again with the upcoming *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*. As you can tell by the title, the authorities are setting speed traps and making life hard for racers with the need—only this time, more customization means more fun, especially when you take your game online. *Most Wanted* may even debut on next-gen consoles. Can *Gran Turismo 4* fend off the need? We don't think so.



MONSTER MAGNET: EA Black Box began its career as one of videogaming's premier hockey-game developers. It's impressive how far it has come in such a short time.

10 TEKKEN 5

BACK FROM THE BRINK

SYS: PS2 PUB: NAMCO DEV: NAMCO REL. DATE: APRIL

Two years ago, when *Tekken 4* made its way home from the arcades, expectations were high. After all, the competition had raised the bar. *Dead or Alive 3* had set the standard for graphics in a fighting game, while the resurgent *Virtua Fighter* series redefined the notion of "depth" with *Virtua Fighter 4: Evolution*. Then, of course, there was *Soul Calibur*. As it played out, *Tekken 4* was really little more than *Tekken More*, offering marginally refined gameplay, a few new doppelgängers of classic characters, and a Tekken force mode inferior to the one found in *Tekken 3*. The only notable addition was boxer Steve Fox, but even he wasn't enough to save this seemingly churned-out addition to the series.

So what to do for an encore? Well, this might be the year of the Great *Tekken* Comeback because *Death by Degrees* is set to make Nina Williams a superstar, and *Tekken 5* looks like a fine return to form, upping the ante on the graphical end while taking a page out of the *VF4* book of customization.

Adding new characters Raven, Feng Wei, and Asuka Kazama to the existing cast of characters (which includes the ageless Paul Phoenix) was a nice start, but the addition of living, interactive, destructible backgrounds is even better. Featuring a brand-new graphics engine that easily rivals *Soul Calibur II*'s, *Tekken 5* allows for serious personalization by offering hundreds of glasses, accessories, and clothing items to dress your characters in. Better yet is the faster, more ferocious gameplay that provides action that is far more fluid than what's come before. Scheduled for release this April, the final home conversion promises to have tons of secrets and modes for *Tekken* fans to really sink their teeth into, and that should be more than worth the wait.



MONSTER MAGNET: GunJack is back!

PWNED!

BOOM BIDDY BYE BYE!

Not every game has a happy ending. Whether it's due to development issues, budget problems, or harsh marketplace conditions, some games just ain't meant to be. Here are some notables from the past year that have gotten the axe...or, as we like to say, gotten PWNED!



SAM & MAX: FREELANCE POLICE: The long-awaited sequel to LucasArts' fan-favorite PC graphic adventure *Sam & Max Hit the Road* dropped off the radar in early 2004, thanks to the company's growing financial issues—not to mention that, well, adventure games aren't too popular anymore. As LucasArts' VP of Finance and Operations Mike Nelson puts it, "After careful evaluation of current marketplace realities and underlying economic considerations, we've decided that this was not the appropriate time to launch a graphic adventure on the PC."

TRUE FANTASY LIVE ONLINE: "The difficult decision to cancel *TFLO* was based on a number of careful considerations, including the game's progression to date and the remaining development time needed to complete such an ambitious project. The MMORPG genre across all platforms has become an incredibly crowded and competitive marketplace," says a Microsoft Game Studios spokesperson. Sounds like Microsoft was feeling the *EverQuest II* and *World of WarCraft* heat here, combined with the late stage in the Xbox's life cycle, which means no MMORPGs for Xbox fans.





BC: Prehistoric action-adventure is the name of the game in the Xbox-exclusive *BC*—or at least it would have been. Details are sketchy here, but Lionhead founder and *Fable* mastermind Peter Molyneux had this to say about *BC*'s indefinite nonexistence: "The decision to suspend work on any game project is always a very difficult one, particularly when it is a title with the potential of *BC*. We hope to revive the project at a later date and will endeavor to assign as many of the team as possible to other Lionhead projects."

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09 ANIMAL CROSSING DS

CROSS ON OVER TO THE DS

SYS: DS PUB: NINTENDO DEV: NINTENDO REL. DATE: TBD

Animal Crossing could very well be the Nintendo DS killer app. The GameCube version is quirky, fun, addictive—and desperately calling out for a touch screen and multiplayer support.

Life in a village of animals dressed in bizarre T-shirts is weird but achieves an odd gameplay Zen. You fish. You catch bugs and dig up fossils. You collect furniture. You send nice—or mean—letters to your neighbors. As mundane as it sounds, everyone who played is champing at the bit for more.

So far, Nintendo hasn't shown much desire to radically alter games for DS, and *AC* should be no exception. Features added to the Japanese release, such as being able to place some items in your yard, will likely be kept, but the real kicker for *Animal Crossing* will be the touch screen and wireless multiplayer. There will also probably be some new minigames, events, and collectibles.

The DS stylus should make many aspects of the game less cumbersome. Much of the game is spent writing letters and managing inventory, and the touch screen should make both functions much easier. Even better, the stylus will enable players to more easily create designs for clothing and wallpaper in the Able Sisters' shop. It would make also sense for Nintendo to fully utilize the DS microphone for gameplay as well, perhaps with some gameplay element that involves blowing into it, à la *WarioWare Touched!*, if not with actual speech recognition.

With multiplayer features, expect fishing competitions to be much more brutal; gameplay elements like bug collecting could be set up as contests as well. Prepare for battles over who digs up the fossils first or buys the only strawberry umbrella at Tom Nook's shop, too!





MONSTER MAGNET: According to the NPD Group, the GameCube version of *Animal Crossing* sold nearly 776,000 copies in the States as of October 2004.

08 KINGDOM HEARTS II

DISNEY'S FINAL FANTASY FULFILLED, AGAIN

SYS: PS2 PUB: SQUARE ENIX DEV: SQUARE ENIX REL. DATE: SEPTEMBER

Kingdom Hearts' coupling of Disney stars and *Final Fantasy* play sensibilities made the game an instant classic in 2001. Sure, it had a wonky camera, but the wonderful story line, intuitive combat system, and memorable characters stole the hearts of gamers of all ages. Fans immediately begged for more, and even the game itself offered major hints that a sequel was in the works—a secret video at the end of *Kingdom Hearts* raised eyebrows and about a million questions, the foremost of which was, "Is this what's to come?"

This fall, Square Enix will bring back the magic in *Kingdom Hearts II*, an action-RPG directed by Tetsuya Nomura, best known for his outstanding character design in *FFX*, *FFX-2*, *FFVII*, and the original *Kingdom Hearts*.

Kingdom Hearts II picks up about a year after the events of the original and stars an older and perhaps wiser Sora, plus Goofy and Donald, as they take on the nefarious "The Heartless." Locales known so far are the Olympus Coliseum, Cave of the Underworld, and the Beast's mountain castle.

Kingdom Hearts II's camera system will be greatly improved, using the right analog stick for basic character movement (insert collective sigh of relief). The game's combat system is expected to be more responsive with new powerful combos and chain attacks. One gameplay feature of particular note is the "transformation drive" (working title). This is a gauge that, when full, lets Sora temporarily fuse with either Goofy or Donald Duck to create a sort of mega-Sora with enhanced fighting powers and skills. When in transformation mode, the Disney character affected disappears and Sora physically changes.

Returning in various capacities are all the popular Disney characters: Hercules, the Beast, and the Genie, to name a few. Mulan and her little sidekick dragon Mushu are the only new characters known at this time. *FFX* fans should watch for a major role for Auron.

An all-star cast is expected back for voice duties, including Haley Joel Osment as Sora, Dan "Homer Simpson" Castellaneta as the Genie, Robbie Benson as the Beast, and Sean Astin as Hercules, in addition to others.

Come fall, it's a good bet Square Enix will put the magic in the Magic Kingdom once again.



MONSTER MAGNET: Mickey Mouse and Mulan appear in *Kingdom Hearts II*.



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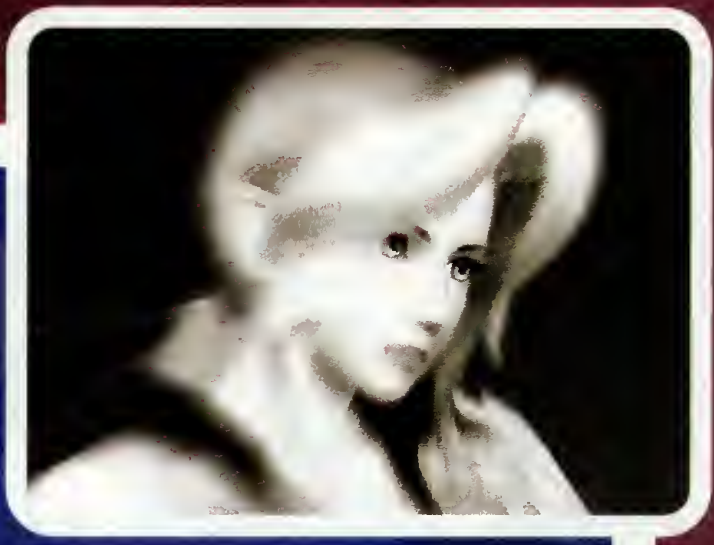
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07 DEAD OR ALIVE 4

A SHOW OF HANDS

TBD | TECMO | TEAM NINJA | WINTER



2004 was a busy year for Tecmo's Team Ninja. First, it kicked the action genre in the ass with the peerless *Ninja Gaiden*, and then it brought the fighting genre back to the old school with the jaw-dropping *Dead or Alive Ultimate*, which gave a rejuvenated remake of *DOA2: Hardcore* to the Xbox masses. So how does Team Ninja follow that up in 2005? Well, besides the surprising Nintendo DS project it has in the cooker, the big news is the return of the *DOA* series proper—*Dead or Alive 4* is rumored to be a launch title for the Xbox 2. *GMR* spoke with Team Ninja boss Tomonobu Itagaki about *DOA4*.

GMR: *DOA3* was the cutting-edge fighter of its time when the Xbox debuted. *DOA Ultimate* looks even better and raised the graphical bar again, adding online battles. How will *DOA4* continue to push the boundaries of fighting games?

TI: Through the use of technology and instinct.

GMR: *DOA3* and *Ultimate* (along with *Xtreme Beach Volleyball* and *Ninja Gaiden*) showed just how graphically potent the Xbox is. What will *DOA4* do to show how powerful the Xbox 2 is, and how will Xbox 2 help *DOA4* do what couldn't be done on any other hardware?

TI: Xbox 2? We haven't officially said anything about *DOA4* being on Xbox 2, so please relax. What I can tell you now is that the advancement on *DOA4* will be as dramatic as *DOA2*'s evolution from *DOA*.

GMR: With *Ultimate*, you brought the entire *DOA* series to the Xbox so that Xbox owners could have the complete history on one console. How will *DOA4* build on the mythology?

TI: I feel great now that I archived everything on Xbox! I feel very happy that I can welcome the next-generation game machine with no reservations.

GMR: How heavily will online play factor into *DOA4*? Did you learn anything helpful about online gaming while making *Ultimate* that will benefit *DOA4*?

TI: Of course you will see more advancement in the online feature. The online element will be deeper and more challenging. More people will be able to share the same time frame. I already have some of my veteran programmers working on the coding for *DOA4*'s online feature.

GMR: Are there any new characters we should know about at this point? Will Lisa from *OOAX* finally be unveiled as a playable fighter?

TI: Lisa was created to appear in *DOA4*. She'll be fighting with a very mysterious skill.

GMR: What do you think of the current Xbox 2 specs? Will they be enough for Microsoft to overtake the PS3?

TI: Simply, Xbox 2 is a very good machine. I said the same thing in 2000 before Xbox was launched, but many didn't believe what I said. Will you believe me now?

GMR: What do you think about the state of fighting games? Does the genre have room for improvement or is it nearing its peak for what is possible with current hardware?



TI: Even if you tried, you can't stop people from punching each other. You don't have to force man and woman to sleep together. Do you know what I'm saying? We're only feeding such human nature. Such things will not change over [the course of] one or two game systems.

GMR: Please tell us anything else we should know about *DOA4*. Since the game remains wrapped in mystery, we'll leave it to you to describe it.

TI: The story of *DOA4* is about Helena. The story begins when Helena takes over the DOATEC as its second chairman. After that, even I don't know what's going to happen. (*Smiles*)

MONSTER MAGNET: Depending on how you look at it, there have been approximately 10 or 11 iterations of the *Dead or Alive* series, including the notable volleyball excursion, and only now are we getting to the fourth official installment.

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Mystery Word Grid

	H				
		E			
P	I	N	C	H	W
	R				
S					

MYSTERY WORD

WORD LIST and LETTER CODE chart

PINCH W	PRESS K	BLAST A	WRECK D
BREAK Z	PUNCH S	SPRAY C	TURBO V
STOMP T	STAND R	PRESS E	DREAM O
CRUSH I	SCORE H	SLANT L	CHASE P

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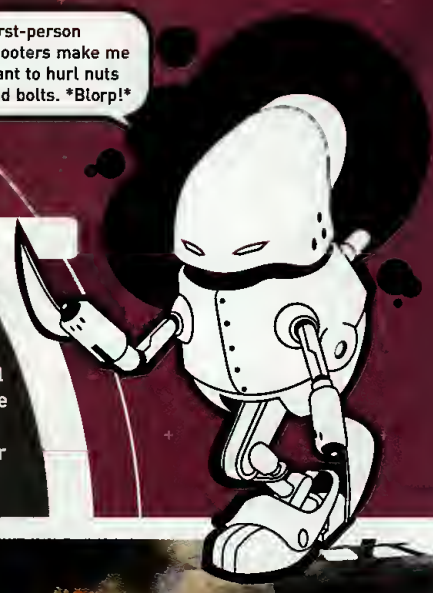
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06 BLACK

A FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER EVEN BAD SHOTS CAN LOVE

PS2/XB | EA GAMES | CRITERION STUDIOS | Q4

Imagine yourself standing face-to-face with a terrorist. He wants you dead. You want him dead first. He has a big gun. You have a bigger gun. He fires and misses. You fire and miss. Still, you somehow manage to kill him. It seems your misguided bullets ricocheted off a steel grating and went right at your antagonist. Meanwhile, some other shrapnel flew his way to finish the job. You want some fresh twists on the first-person-shooter genre? You've got 'em with *Black*.

"*Black* is going to do for the FPS genre what *Burnout* did for racing," boasts Craig Sullivan, lead designer on the game. And since Sullivan works with Criterion—the very studio that kicked our collective asses with *Burnout 3: Takedown* just a few months ago—we're inclined to believe him.

With *Black*, Criterion aims to represent the common act of shooting a gun in the most visceral way a game has ever offered. In other words, it wants to make missing your target just as satisfying as filling him with lead. Practically anything you shoot reacts in an appropriate manner. Shoot a car tire, it deflates. Pop out a light, your screen gets darker. You can even blast through doors. And all this happens in deafening surround sound of the purest "hell yeah" variety.

"In *Black*, the guns are the characters, and the dialogue starts when you pull the trigger," summarizes Sullivan. Sounds like a script no man can deny. Still, the actual story line associated with the game should win over fans of shows like *24* and *Alias*, which, along with the current state of world events, Sullivan cites as inspiration. "These are the sort of military operations you don't see on CNN," he clarifies. True that.

MONSTER MAGNET: The title *Black* derives from the "black operations" that transpire throughout the game.



05 SPLINTER CELL CHAOS THEORY

SNEAKING BACK INTO YOUR LIVING ROOM

SYS: GC/PC/PS2/XB | PUB: UBISOFT | DEV: UBISOFT MONTREAL/UBISOFT ANNECY | REL. DATE: MARCH

Despite coming out only a year after the second *Splinter Cell* game (*Pandora Tomorrow*), *Chaos Theory* is unlikely to be seen as a quick cash-in by anyone. When the developers at Ubisoft Montreal finished the first game in the series, they jumped ahead to *Chaos Theory*, allowing them to take their time with a follow-up while a team in Shanghai pumped out the second game.

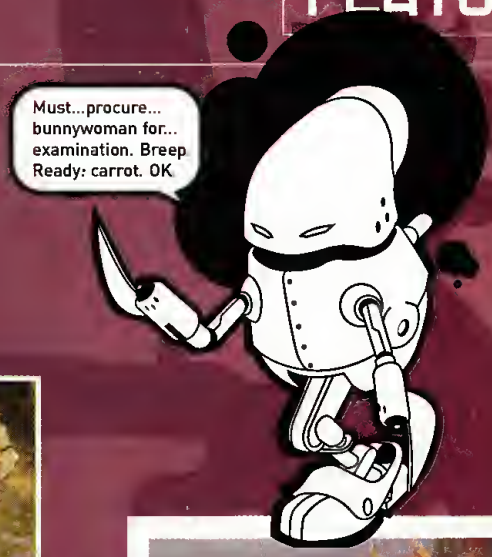
Given the two-plus year development cycle, the team wanted to attack one of the main complaints heard from players. "From all the feedback we had of the original *Splinter Cell* and then *Pandora*, we realized that the game has a lot of frustration," says Mathieu Ferland, producer at Ubisoft Montreal. "There's a lot of trial and error, and because of the linearity and the checkpoints, people spend a lot of time in the game [trying] to reach the next checkpoint. So what we want to do is give the opportunity to the player to spend more time trying things instead of fighting against the game."

As such, open-ended objectives give players more freedom to do what they want instead of following a linear path. Enemy A.I. is much more lifelike as guards chase after you, take cover, and work together. You can save anywhere instead of at certain checkpoints, and alarms are more realistic (you will no longer be punished for leaving a guard's body out in the open—another guard has to physically stumble upon it, as it should have been from the beginning).

Players can also expect an overhauled graphics engine using normal mapping effects similar to those in *Halo 2*; an evolved version of the competitive multiplayer from *Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow*; an all-new cooperative campaign; and loads of smaller details, like the ability to aim ambidextrously to make it easier to enter a room from either side.



MONSTER MAGNET: A new knife not only provides close-combat options, it also allows you to cut through thin walls.



04 JADE EMPIRE

WOULD YOU LIKE KUNG POW WITH THAT KOTOR?

SYS: XB PUB: MICROSOFT DEV: BIOWARE REL. DATE: MARCH



Knights of the Old Republic, *Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*, *MDK2*: Canadian developer BioWare's résumé reads like a list of inductees into the videogame hall of fame. With its double platinum-selling *KOTOR*, BioWare practically reinvented the role-playing genre, and many pundits declared it had taken the RPG crown from Japan.

It is then with little doubt, though with a pinch of overheightened expectations, that BioWare's newest opus, *Jade Empire*, will make a run for RPG greatness. Based roughly on the *KOTOR* game engine, *Jade Empire* is an action-RPG inspired by Hong Kong epic films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*. The basic plot: The player is a novice martial arts student in mythical ancient China. As an evil threatens the school, the player is sent on a journey to become a martial arts master and eventually save the school. The Shaw Brothers would be proud.

Whereas *KOTOR*'s combat system is essentially turn based, *Jade Empire*'s takes place in real time and includes a remarkable variety of fighting styles that become available as the player progresses. These styles span the gamut from street brawling to sophisticated martial arts such as centipede and mantis. Special weapons like the Twin Axes and even the occasional chair are at players' disposal, as are magic attacks. Most interesting is the ability to switch fighting styles on the fly—players can use one style to start the fight and another to finish it.

Jade Empire's apparent focus on combat belies its BioWare-signature depth. Players choose between two opposing paths—the Way of the Open Palm and the Way of the Closed Fist. Each path requires both good and not-so-good acts that will result in different story lines. As players grow through the game, they attract followers, mediate disputes, investigate mysteries, and help others with their ills.

If a mega-epic action-RPG isn't enough, BioWare is throwing in a minigame built around the *Marvelous Dragonfly*, the ship that transports players through the *Jade Empire* land. In travel mode, *Jade Empire* becomes an *Ikaruga*-like side-scrolling shooter—a refreshing change from the typical "press A and move the ship" approach.

Jade Empire is shaping up to be the all-that-and-more kind of game the world has come to expect from BioWare. Sure, expectations are high, but the pattern suggests we won't be seeing *Jaded Empire*.

MONSTER MAGNET: The player character Furious Ming was literally modeled after *Jade Empire* Lead Animator Deo Perez.



03 FINAL FANTASY XII

IVALICE STRIKES BACK

PS2 SQUARE ENIX SQUARE ENIX WINTER

One of the best moves Square ever made was when it drafted game director Yasumi Matsuno away from the confines of *Ogre Battle*/*Tactics Ogre* developer Quest (which Square later acquired) and put him to work on the *Final Fantasy* license, the fruits of which became *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance*. While his ambitious excursion into hardcore action-strategy-RPG territory with *Vagrant Story* was critically hailed, it wasn't until 2003's masterpiece *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* that he brought gamers back to the world of Ivatice, a prelude to what might be the most exciting *Final Fantasy* game to date.

Final Fantasy XII marks a significant departure from the J-pop-meets-*Charlie's Angels* meanderings of *Final Fantasy X-2*. Combining the heady pseudopolitical plots of his *Tactics* games with a brash new real-time battle engine that dispenses with the old active-time battle system, *XII* looks geared up to be the *Empire Strikes Back* of role-playing games. The characters Vaan (the fey young hero), Penelo, Ashe, Balfleur (the sky pirate), and his partner Fran (a rabbit-eared viera like those found in *Tactics Advance*) must take arms against the ruthless judges, the enforcers of the laws that bind Archadia, the city in which they live.

XII is also unique to the series in how it ties in with previously released games (both *Tactics* games took place in Ivalice) while not being a direct sequel. This lends the game a richer feel, giving Matsuno and his team more familiar elements to work with, as the mythology has been in place for nearly eight years now.

Of course the graphics offer a level of detail impressive even by *Final Fantasy*'s standards, with the art direction spearheaded by long-time collaborator Akihiko Yoshida, whose ornate character designs make *XII* one of the most distinctive games in the series. Since the game is tentatively scheduled for a late spring release in Japan, don't expect to see it until holiday season 2005. Still, when the game already looks this good, it'll certainly be worth the wait.

MONSTER MAGNET: Given Matsuno's track record for deep, detailed games, we expect his first crack at a bona fide *Final Fantasy* game to be his most far-reaching, ambitious work yet.

02 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

THE MISSING LINK

SYS: GC | NINTENDO | NINTEN[illegible] | REL D[illegible] | TBD

The video concluded, and everyone who had viewed it remained in a state of shock, trying to process what had just happened. The lights came up and there he was, sword in one hand and shield in the other: Miyamoto dramatically signaling that yes, he's heard you, and yes, Nintendo will make a "realistic" *Zelda* (whatever that means, you know, in the context of elves fighting goblins).

This, of course, was the scene at Nintendo's E3 press conference last year upon the debut of the GameCube's newest, and currently unsubtitled, *Legend of Zelda*. Eschewing the cel-shading of *Wind Waker*, the latest *Zelda* revisits Link's formative teenage years. Says Miyamoto, "Link has grown up. He'll act different and look different." This means that not only will Link look more mature, but his age—and all the drama associated with that time in a young [illegible]'s life—will factor in to the plot.

In typical Nintendo fashion, not many details are known. But based on what was shown in the initial trailer and revealed in subsequent interviews, horseback combat figures to play an important part in the game (it's something that Miyamoto has been wanting to do since *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask*). It's also apparent that the game will look stunning. It's based on an [illegible]ly modified *Wind Waker* engine, and the mere sight of sunlight streaming through a thick forest—not to mention the [illegible]ive horseback battle that takes place [illegible] expanse of Hyrule Field—is enough to [illegible]mulate the senses.

Based on claims that the game is very [illegible]ng in development and recent signs [illegible]ting that it may appear in the first [illegible] of 2005, one of the new year's biggest [illegible]es might arrive sooner than you think.

MONSTER MAGNET: A good sign: Producer Eiji Aonuma wants to improve upon *Zelda*'s puzzle solving. That's already the best part of the series.









01 WANDA AND THE COLOSSUS

CLIMBING THE MONSTERS OF SUCCESS

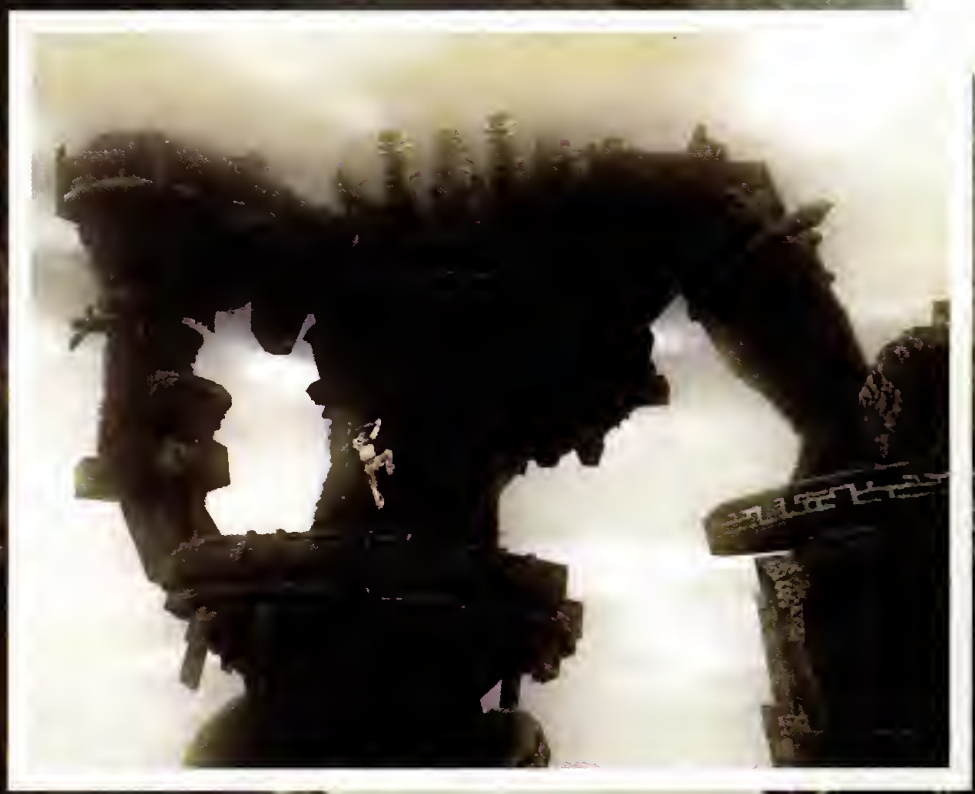
PS2 | TBD | SONY | TBD

It's hard to say where Fumito Ueda came up with the concept for *Ico*. Maybe it was the years of training under the watchful eye of maverick developer Kenji Eno at avant-garde development studio Warp (*D2*, *Enemy Zero*). Whatever the case, it's apparent that *Ico* director Fumito Ueda's tenure under that umbrella developing groundbreaking, offbeat games was time well spent, as it eventually led to the creation of *Ico*. A critical success (but commercial flop), *Ico* was an impressive show of restraint in the face of ever-indulgent game design, stripping the game down to the purest, barest essentials necessary in a 3D adventure while offering sun-bleached visuals that felt like a daydream. Gamers led the young, horned Ico and the frail, iridescent Yorda through the stillness of their castle environment through to the game's epic, heart-wrenching ending.

While hardcore gamers have waited patiently for any sign of *Nico* (the oft-rumored sequel—the name combines the Japanese word for "two" (*ni*) and "Ico"), what Ueda's team has emerged with is, amazingly, far more wondrous. *Wanda and the Colossus* adds another page to the Great Book of Game Design by unleashing a series of living, moving levels in the form of giant creatures that the hero must scale, "solve," and ultimately defeat. These creatures vary wildly in form, with some resembling towering, King Kong–sized, mask-wearing apes, and others looking like elongated, serpentine insects that soar high above the ground.

Though *Colossus* will feature normal, nonmoving environments to explore as well, the focus of the game will center on hunting the monsters—usually while riding on horseback (take that, *Zelda*!)—and deciphering how to take them down. Solutions are organic and environment based, much in the way Ico had to make proper use of his surroundings to solve the problems at hand. Also similar to the first game are *Colossus*' sparse, sun-drenched graphics that distinguish it from your typical game. While a publisher has yet to be announced, very few games manage to truly take the medium in such startling new directions in terms of both gameplay and visual design. *Wanda and the Colossus* looks set to do just that.









MONSTER MAGNET: *Ico* was originally designed for the 32-bit PlayStation hardware before eventually making the transition to the PS2. *Wanda*, on the other hand, is being designed specifically for the PS2, and it shows in the exceptionally sharp graphics and creature design.



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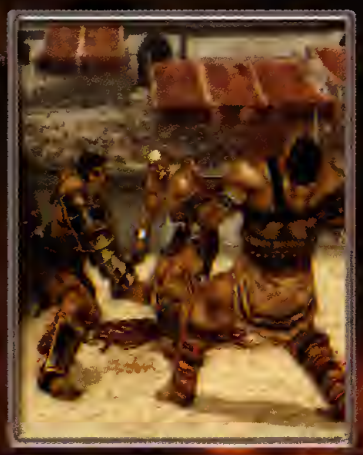
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44 B.C. ROMAN EMPIRE

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RESIDENT EVIL 4

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

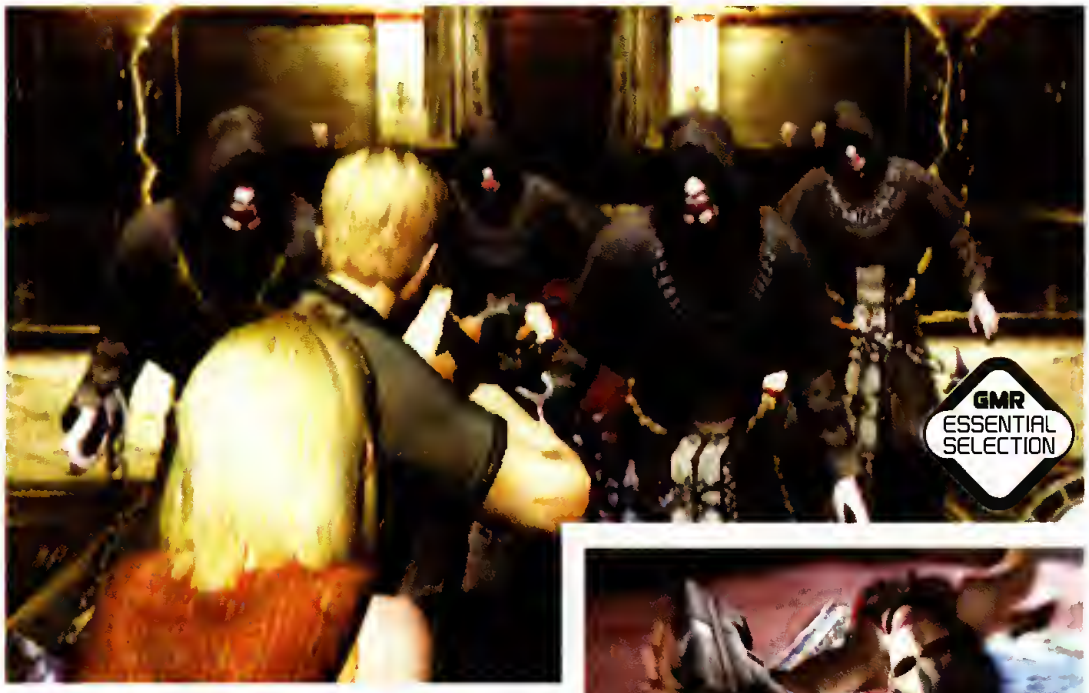
MATURE | GC

The few people who cling to the notion that the long-dormant series *Alone In the Dark* created the survival-horror genre typically neglect to acknowledge that the *Resident Evil* franchise *defined* it. Nothing stirs the senses quite so much as the shuffle of the undead, who linger just out of earshot, game in and game out. While the *Resident Evil* series has suffered from a slight identity crisis as of late (thanks to countless spin-offs, like *Gunhazard*), there has never been a better time for a *Resident* renaissance than now. Recent games like *RE Zero* have high production values but suffer from "been there, done that" predictability; however, *Resident Evil 4* is the one to bring it all back. Within the first five minutes of picking up the controller, you will realize that this is the new genesis of survival-horror.

The story is simple: The president's daughter has been kidnapped by a mysterious terrorist group, and Leon Kennedy is summoned (unofficially, and in the blackest-op sense) to infiltrate the enemy stronghold, with the intent of locating and extracting the young Ashley Graham. This basic premise provides the backdrop against which 25-plus hours (you read that right) of the tightest, most tension-filled gameplay you've ever experienced unfolds.

What becomes obvious with very little play time is that *RE4* addresses nearly every complaint the increasingly irritated gaming public has had with the series.

1) Gone are the leaden, remote-control-tank-like controls—*RE* producer Hiroyuki Kobayashi attributes this fix to an adjusted camera scheme. Unlike previous games, which were viewed from the standard third-person action perspective, *RE4* creeps in a little closer on Leon, Sam Fisher–style, especially while in combat mode. With his survival knife mapped to the L trigger and all guns on the R trigger (the camera is controlled with the left analog stick), attacking Leon's enemies is a much more precise affair, which is important, given the rag-doll damage the new game engine allows for. Of course, the old reliable head shot still works, provided Leon's using heavy metal (riot guns, Magnums, etc.), but with many enemies wearing helmets and protective gear, alternate measures must occasionally be taken. Targeting an enemy's knees is a quick way to buckle them, while blowing off a character's arms will cause him to drop his weapon. A new *Shenmue*-like action-button system sporadically requires players to hit a specific button or combination of buttons in order to kick the enemy away, knock down a ladder, or dodge an incoming boulder. It adds variety in places where there didn't use to be any, and it keeps things fresh.











→ *Resident Evil 4* doesn't save the big boss encounters for the very end of the game. It throws them at you from the get-go, like El Gigante here (middle, left). Every boss has a specific strategy (read: weak point) that must be exploited, or else they'll make quick work of young Mr. Kennedy. These battles are brutal and fast-paced, requiring sharp reflexes and quick thinking.

2) Inventory management is so user-friendly now, it's practically sensible. Found items like herbs, grenades, and ammo can be seen lying around (aplenty, even) in the open or can be liberated from crates, barrels, cabinets, and other places. Animals, like snakes and chickens and fish, can even be shot, usually dropping an edible, health-restoring item in the process. However, if you don't have enough room in your inventory, you can put the items down and leave them for later. Or you can use medicinal items on the spot. Keys, treasures, and other mission-specific items no longer take up inventory space, and saving is done ribbon-free now. But with the item boxes of yesteryear and in with shrouded merchants who, in their best Down Under accents, offer you all manner of weapons, healing items, and even inventory-expanding attaché cases for purchase. The items are financed in a variety of ways. Treasure maps highlighting areas where a rare gem or artifact might be hidden can be bought from the merchants. Finding these valuables, and even combining some of them for greater worth, helps Leon not only establish a greater arsenal but upgrade it as well. Weapon attributes like ammo count, reload time, and, of course, stopping power can all be upgraded multiple times. It's this factor that gives *RE4* an action-RPG quality that it's never had before. Leon may not level up, but his gear does.

3) Presentation is king, and in this respect *RE4* excels. If you can't tell from the screenshots, you'll believe it in motion: *RE4* is the best-looking game around. *Ninja Gaiden* may look a bit slicker, but that game is made up almost entirely of fantasy-based environments. *RE4* goes a step further by constructing a remote Spanish town, an accompanying forested area (which is nearly as dead as its inhabitants), gloomy lochs, mining shafts, ski lifts, watery dungeons, an incredibly ornate castle, and so much more. It's not just the environments, but the details. One hallway in the castle, out of hundreds of hallways, will have dozens of paintings hanging from the walls, each of them unique. It's worth it to stand around and point Leon's gun at things just to marvel at the detail of everything. And then there are all the fantastic weather and lighting effects, and—believe it—mostly excellent voice acting too.

4) It's unnervingly realistic when enemies bob and weave out of the line of Leon's laser sight. It's not exactly *Halo 2*-caliber A.I. he's up against, but in the context of this game, it works great. At times, the feeling of oppression is almost overwhelming, and that's impressive. This is most tangible when the player must control Ashley...*using old-school* RE *controls*. Armed with only a flashlight and crap controls, you'll be begging to be back in Leon's shoes, weapon in hand.

Of course, not everything is perfect. *RE4* suffers from the *KOTOR* effect in that every basic villager pack is made up of the same five models (although other enemies vary greatly), and the plot begins to drag after about, oh, the 15th hour, especially when some fool is documenting everything, leaving his notes out in plain sight for Leon to find. The level design occasionally resembles a NASCAR track, and it would have been nice if Leon had a strafe function. But these are minor nitpicks; *RE4* is still magnificent. It's a terrific, if tardy, showcase for the GameCube, and it's every bit as worthy as the *Halo*s, the *GTA*s, and the *MGS*es of this generation. This is a stunning return to form.

_James Mielke

PUB CAPCOM
DEV CAPCOM
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $49.99
PLAYERS 1
ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR COUP DE GRACE **10/10**

GRIMIER THAN SILENT HILL 4
NOT AS FOXY AS MILLA JOVOVICH
WAIT FOR IT RESIDENT EVIL OUTBREAK 2



[ADA, OH WHERE YOU BEEN?]
THE RETURN OF THE DRAGON LADY

It seems like it was just yesterday that Ada Wong mysteriously disappeared toward the end of Capcom's classic, *Resident Evil 2*. But she's back, with an edge. After all, who the hell pulls a gun on Leon Kennedy? Well, besides a village full of freaked-out inhabitants.

Ada Wong does, but what is she doing in this remote neck of the woods? How did she survive the seemingly mortal injuries she earned in *RE2*? Did those wounds leave a sexy scar? The answers to most of these burning questions can be found in *Resident Evil 4*.

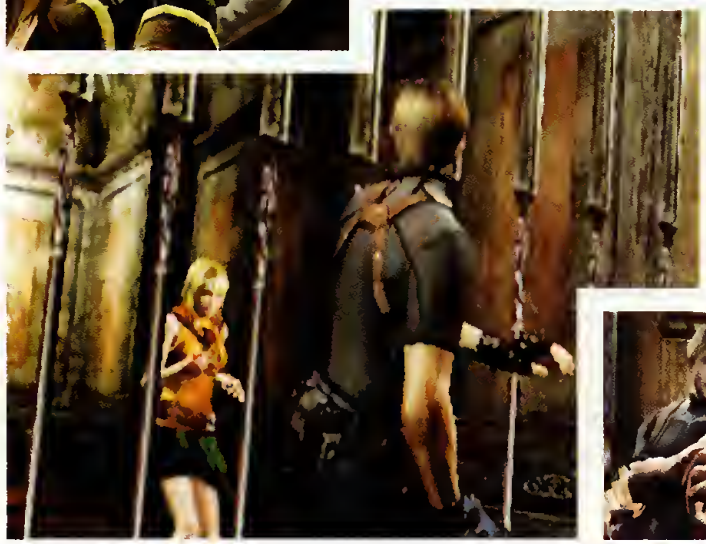




2ND OPINION

If only it didn't have to take so long for decent controls, efficient item management, and a ribbonless save system, I might have been an *RE* fan sooner. Gorgeous in its dirty desolation, *RE4* will be remembered as one of the GC's defining moments.

_Andrew Pfister







→ Should Leon die, and he will, he's not forced to restart from the last save point. Instead, *RE4* allows players to restart at the last checkpoint, which is usually the most recent load zone, making for a much more forgiving game.

IT'S MURDER OUT THERE...

GETTING BY IN *RESIDENT EVIL 4* ISN'T EASY. BUT THAT'S NO REASON TO THROW IN THE TOWEL JUST YET. *GMR* SHOWS YOU HOW TO EVEN THE ODDS, HOW TO SURVIVE, AND HOW THE BEST DEFENSE IS A GOOD OFFENSE.



SHOOT 'EM IN THE KNEES!

In a nice little variation on the usual zombie-blasting theme, *RE4* allows for more engaging strategies than past games when it comes to dealing with your inhuman foes. In the past, the most effective method for punking the opposition was a shotgun lodged firmly under a clenched zombie jaw, trigger pulled. In *RE4* it's not so cut and dried. Since the creeps come at you with much more than just outstretched hands (namely: chain saws, dynamite, pitchforks, flaming crossbows, etc.), Leon needs to be more flexible in his approach.

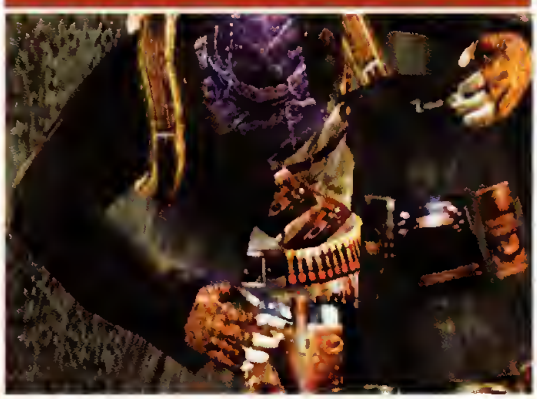


While different players will find their own favorite methods for dealing with the diverse hordes of enemies that come chugging your way, we recommend capping them in the knees. Head shots aren't always a reliable way of taking the enemy down (there are multiple reasons for this), especially with a weaker handgun. Shooting the nasties in the knees is usually a great way to drop them, giving Leon both breathing room and the time to plant a well-aimed slug in the back of the prostrate villager's head. An advanced technique is to look for the demented villagers who like to carry lit dynamite around (it's a laugh riot) and clip them in the arm or hand. They'll not only lose a limb, but also drop the dynamite, blowing themselves and any nearby bowling buddies to bits (alliteration is your best friend, believe it).

'ELLO, STRANGER!

One of the coolest new features in *Resident Evil 4* is the addition of the mysterious, shrouded merchants who greet Leon at intervals throughout the game and offer to sell him a variety of helpful wares.

Items like first aid sprays and weapons are on offer, although the merchants do not sell ammo. In addition, addressing one of the big issues that plagued earlier *RE* games is the selection of increasingly larger attaché cases that Leon can buy, allowing him to carry more guns (and their upgrades, like stocks and scopes), more grenades, more herbs, and more ammo. Leon finances these purchases by finding hidden jewels and treasures strewn throughout the game. Whatever you do, make sure not to accidentally kill one of these merchants, as they won't return, making your game considerably harder as a result.



WATCH YOUR STEP

As if running for his life and turning each corner with dread wasn't bad enough for Leon, the villagers love to put traps all over tarnation to help keep him on his toes. This adds a tremendous amount of tension without resorting to rabid Dobermans jumping through windows (although there is some of that sort of thing too). Check it.

In *RE4*, certain areas in the game are laced with trip wires and TNT, while others are peppered liberally with bear traps. The worst areas are the ones that feature both (aka the first 30 minutes of the game). Use your handgun to snipe the TNT (stand back) and to pop the traps so that they clamp shut safely out of range, saving Leon from having to use his precious herbs and sprays.





ET TU, YORDA?

In a bizarre case of separated-at-birth, *Resident Evil 4* seems like the twisted, evil, supersized brethren of another distinctive survival game—*Ico*. In *Ico*, the eponymous hero is charged with protecting a young, helpless female whose only in-game survival skill is running away.

Much in the way Ico was tasked with beating away the shadow monsters before they could drag off the shimmering Yorda, *RE4*'s hero, Leon, can't let the president's daughter, Ashley, out of his sight. If Leon is distracted for too long dispatching enemies, one of the game's freaky minions will run up, grab her, and quickly disappear into the darkness. If this happens, carefully blast him (the rifle is a good choice to make your head shots stand up) so that he drops her. If Leon doesn't rescue Ashley in time, it's game over, baby. Leon can also tell Ashley to stay put or follow him (sort of like in *Abe's Oddysee*, but less rubbery) as the situation demands, which comes in handy during a few *Ico*-like step-on-the-switch puzzles.

BACKYARD WRESTLING 2: THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

ICP LANDSCAPING, AT YOUR SERVICE

MATURE | PS2 [REVIEWED] | XB

The first *Backyard Wrestling* title deserved to be buried in a shoebox in the backyard. Instead, the series has been given a second chance. *Backyard Wrestling 2* takes advantage of this new lease on life by endangering the lives of its onscreen combatants in much better fashion than before.

Backyard 2's revamped engine now has roughly the same number of grapples and strikes as *SmackDown!*'s, but the game still centers on environmental interaction. Every object in the creative levels is fair game, and weapons aren't heat-seeking missiles anymore. Gameplay still has its share of problems—a fussy camera, bad collision, and the inability to grapple a dazed opponent—but these are minor compared to the first *BYW*'s deal-breakers. Multiplayer is sadly relegated to two players on one console.

While it's a vast improvement over the original, *BYW2* doesn't usurp the *WWE* titles or *Def Jam Fight for NY* by any stretch. If wrestling games were a chick clique, *Backyard Wrestling* would be the tagalong who the other girls keep around to make them feel better about themselves. But since the sound track features some great bands that stick to the underground vibe, the story mode entertains for a while, and you can get your ass liquefied by Insane Clown Posse, you may actually want to take her out once or twice this time around.

_Justin Leeper

PUB EIDOS | PRICE $49.99
DEV PARADOX | PLAYERS 2
REL AVAILABLE NOW | ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR 6/10 DULL ACHE

BETTER THAN BACKYARD WRESTLING 1
NOT AS GOOD AS DEF JAM FIGHT FOR NY
BROKEN PROMISES NO ONLINE



→ Subtlety was never *Backyard Wrestling*'s strongest suit, what with all the smashed fluorescent bulbs and barbed wire. *There Goes the Neighborhood* lives up to its name when actual porn stars move into the roster of playable characters. Although, the subtitle might have more to do with the screenshot above.









PUB ROCKSTAR GAMES | PRICE $29.99
DEV DIGITAL ECLIPSE | PLAYERS 1
REL AVAILABLE NOW | ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR 4/10 MISSION FAILED

REMINDS US OF GRAND THEFT AUTO 2
NOT AS GOOD AS GRAND THEFT AUTO SAN ANDREAS
WAIT FOR IT GRAND THEFT AUTO SAN ANDREAS ADVANCE (YEAH RIGHT!)

GRAND THEFT AUTO ADVANCE

FUHGEDDABOUTIT

MATURE | GBA

Nostalgia is a double-edged knife. No matter how much fondness you might have for the early PS1 *Grand Theft Auto* games, *GTA Advance* will leave you wondering what was so great about them in the first place. It attempts to re-create the top-down style of those antiquated games, but ends up feeling like a patchwork of redundant fetch quests tied together by an all-too-tedious story.

The game takes place in Liberty City, most recently seen in *GTA3*. You play a two-bit hood named Mike who's working alongside his partner Vinnie to round up some cash and get the hell out of Dodge. Unfortunately, Vinnie gets his ticket punched early on when he's caught in a car bombing, and your motivation quickly turns to revenge.

The *GTA* fans out there already know the drill: You spend most of the game carrying out missions for various crime bosses, dodging the cops, and doing a whole lot of carjacking. Most of the missions are thinly veiled hunt-and-fetch routines, which gets old rather quickly. There are a few fun missions and side quests, but the core game is nothing more than a monotonous string of "go here, do this" goals that offer little of the series' trademark complexity. You also won't find much personality here; some of the characters are decent, but the city itself is a monument to uninspired dullness.

If anything, *GTA Advance* reminds us just how far this series has come. The deep gameplay of recent entries makes a poor leap to the portable screen, with flat visuals and highly repetitive sound. There are worse ways to spend your time—but if you're looking for a faithful and compelling *GTA* adventure, you'll likely be disappointed.

_Ryan Scott


WHO ARE YOU?
ZELDA
The Minish Cap
NINTENDO
MYSTIC
MICROSCOPIC
CONQUERER
YOU CAN USE THE POWER OF THE MINISH CAP TO GET SMALL
AND UNLOCK CLUES ON YOUR QUEST TO SAVE HYRULE.
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA®: THE MINISH CAP.
ONLY FOR GAME BOY ADVANCE.
EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild Fantasy Violence
GAME BOY ADVANCE SP
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→ Be warned, this review is only for the Xbox version, as the PS2 *Ghost Recon 2* is an entirely different game.

GHOST RECON 2

MAKING KIM JONG ILL

MATURE | XB

PUBLISHER	UBISOFT
DEVELOPER	RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT
PRICE	$49.99
RELEASE	AVAILABLE NOW
PLAYERS	1-16 (ONLINE)
ORIGIN	U.S.A.

If you've already visited the flashpoints of other Tom Clancy–branded shooters on Xbox, then you know exactly what to expect from *Ghost Recon 2*: intense, pseudorealistic firefights punctuated by sudden death and gun worship, all sandwiched between a near-future backdrop predicated on real-world global politics. That much you know.

But time and again, *Clancy* shooters have blindsided gamers with the inequality between a mediocre offline campaign and a red-hot online experience. Sadly, this uneven tradition continues in *Ghost Recon 2*. While there's nothing technically wrong with *Ghost Recon 2*'s single-player game, there isn't a compelling reason to play it either. The predictable trip wire events, the unresponsive, brain-dead A.I., and the lack of a coherent narrative exude an oppressive been-there-done-that vibe.

Luckily, the insipid offline game serves as a training ground for its exciting online counterpart. On Live, the game offers a wide array of tactical strategy. By using the florally dense outdoor environs, even simple deathmatch-style multiplayer modes like last man standing become tense stalking sessions where every turn could be your last. When played in teams, *Ghost Recon 2* feels like a genuine virtual battlefield. Using tactics you learned in games like *Full Spectrum Warrior* isn't just possible, but downright necessary.

Although *Ghost Recon 2*'s Live implementation is still rough around the edges, the game was meant to be played online. Taken for the slower, paranoia-inducing shooter that it is, the game is different enough as to be practically incomparable to *Halo 2*—and anyone who thinks there isn't room for both games to exist online is just plain wrong. ◀

_Che Chou

GMR MILITARISTIC **7/10**

BETTER THAN SHADOW OPS: RED MERCURY
NOT AS GOOD AS SOCOM 2
WAIT FOR IT: RAINBOW SIX 4

2ND OPINION

It's not that *GR2* does anything terribly wrong—the graphics and control are solid, and the new viewpoint and improved balance between action and strategy are nice improvements—it's just that online and off, it doesn't do enough that's different or special to stand out in the Xbox's most crowded genre. ◀

_Mark MacDonald
Executive editor, *EGM*

CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR

WARUM NICHT KANN ICH SPEICHERN?

TEEN | XB [REVIEWED] | GC | PS2

Call of Duty: Finest Hour puts players in three campaigns in World War II: Russia, North Africa, and Central Europe. The game starts near the end of the war, and players control one of several soldiers as the Third Reich collapses and the Allies drive to Berlin. The game's presentation is incredible: Outdoor environments are colossal and extremely well detailed, and hearing gunshots echo from miles away gives the impression of being a part of a huge concerted effort.

Unfortunately, the A.I. should have spent more time in basic training. While enemies quickly take up positions of defeated comrades and continue the fight, grenades cause foes to crouch in place instead of actually running for cover, and the small squad of Allied troops that the CPU controls has suicidal tendencies. This raises an interesting dilemma: Should you use a health pack on NPCs or yourself, knowing full well that your CPU comrades are just as likely to save your life with a well-aimed sticky bomb as they are to run headlong into a machine gun nest? Other holes also appear in gameplay balance. Health packs are either as ubiquitous as the swastika or as scarce as chocolate rations. Checkpoints are much too far apart, and restarting a half-hour-long level after accidentally eating a grenade is infuriating. Online modes like search and destroy, deathmatch, and capture the flag are smooth, if underpopulated. Still, armchair generals who missed the PC version will enjoy it.

_Doug Trueman

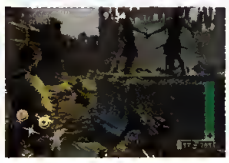
PUB ACTIVISION — PRICE $49.99
DEV SPARK UNLIMITED — PLAYERS 1-16 (ONLINE)
REL AVAILABLE NOW — ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR — ACHTUNG 7/10

BETTER THAN: SOLDIER OF FORTUNE
NOT AS GOOD AS: MEDAL OF HONOR
WAIT FOR IT: TIMESPLITTERS: FUTURE PERFECT

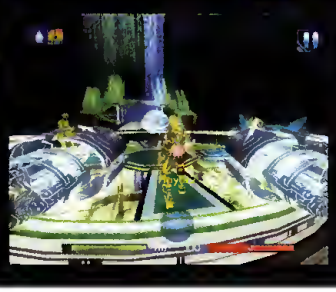












TRON 2.0 KILLER APP

CONTROL - ALT - DELETE

TEEN | XB

If this game had come out a year ago, it would have easily gotten a score of 8 or 9. Oh, wait. It did. The PC version was brilliant, with amazing visuals, a cool interface, and a nostalgic look back at the cult-classic 1982 movie. This long-overdue port brings most of that flavor, a couple of interesting multiplayer modes—and a whole lot of new problems—to the Xbox.

As in the flick that dressed up Jeff Bridges in neon spandex, you are a real, live guy who is digitized and transported into a computer world. It's a place where users are thought of as gods and programs are real people.

Fans of the original movie will appreciate how the game picks up 20-some years after its events, in which a lofty Microsoft-like supercomputer tried to take over the world. Most people who avoided the DVD might still dig it, though. The story is trippy, and trust us, you haven't lived until you've sprinted through a hard drive that's in the middle of being reformatted. Or tried getting yourself uploaded into some antiquated PC.

Graphically, the game still looks nice and glowy, although it's been dumbed down a little to work on your TV screen. The pacing is good and the RPG-ish level building gives you different ways to evolve your program. Even the controls translate well to a gamepad. Waiting through all the loading to see it in action, though, is a real buzz killer. Within the first few seconds of the game you're treated to a cut-scene. Then a loading screen. Then the opening credits. Then another loading screen. Yay! They should've had the entire game install itself on the hard drive.

Throw in the cool (but slightly frustrating) lightcycle races and the ability for 16 players to square off online, and you've got yourself a decent game. It's just a little too late for a reboot from last year.

_Darren Gladstone

PUB BUENA VISTA INTERACTIVE — PRICE $39.99
DEV CLIMAX — PLAYERS 1-16 (ONLINE)
REL AVAILABLE NOW — ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR — 00110111 7/10

THERE ARE TINY MEN INSIDE YOUR COMPUTER
HIGH STYLE, BUT LONG LOAD TIMES
BUY THE PC VERSION INSTEAD OF THIS

VIRTUA QUEST
VIRTUA FIGHTER KIDS...TAKE TWO

EVERYONE | GC [REVIEWED] | PS2

When rumors of a *Virtua Fighter* RPG first circulated through the gaming world, visions of an epic quest bloomed in the minds of fighting-game fanatics. Imagine: spiky-haired kung fu master Akira Yuki traipsing across the Orient, amassing a party of lovable *VF* costars on a quest to defeat some ultimate evil. Sadly, the reality doesn't quite live up to the fiction—*Virtua Quest* takes a stab at making Sega's mano-a-mano franchise into a kid-friendly romp, leaching much of its trademark style and gameplay in the process.

Outside of guest appearances from nearly all the *VF* characters, precious little here bears any resemblance to genre-defining fighting games. In fact, the game feels oddly piecemeal: From its bland anime hero on a quest to collect "data chips" to its "downloadable" special abilities, *Virtua Quest* seems more like a *Mega Man Battle Network* game than a *VF* title. Even weirder, the game-within-a-game narrative mimics *.Hack's* unique premise, and the futuristic-chic aesthetic looks like a wholesale rip-off of Sega's own *Phantasy Star Online* (right down to the cute robotic "mags" floating over characters' shoulders). Originality is not *Virtua Quest's* strong suit.

This derivative story and borrowed art design mask *VQ's* decidedly decent gameplay—hard-hitting combos come out with ease, and spunky hero Sei can run on walls, swing around with a laser whip, and slow down time à la *The Matrix*. Tight gameplay is *Virtua Fighter's* hallmark, and that legacy does inform the action here. Sadly, the level design constructed around this combat doesn't give it much room to breathe: Short, simple levels populated with repetitive enemies and brain-dead puzzles offer little challenge. Bewildering camera angles and obnoxious jumping puzzles don't do the action any favors, either. Boss battles fare a bit better, but the whole escapade ends so quickly (around 12 hours tops) that you'll feel a bit cheated.

In the end, nobody really wins here: While *Virtua Quest* certainly isn't a bad game, it's not one that will lure tykes into checking out Sega's hardcore fighting oeuvre. Nor will it please series fans looking for a quality extension of their favorite one-on-one brawler.

_Shane Bettenhausen

PUB SEGA
DEV SEGA AM2
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $39.99
PLAYERS 1
ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR REBOOT 5/10

ON PAR WITH MEGA MAN NETWORK TRANSMISSION
NOT AS GOOD AS ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER
WAIT FOR IT: DEATH BY DEGREES





NFL STREET 2
MORE LIKE NFL BACKYARD

EVERYONE | PS2 [REVIEWED] | GC | XB

There's nothing quite like pulling on your old-school, bright orange, dirtied-up Elway jersey over your winter parka and heading out with the boys to the nearest muddy field. Rain, shine, or *The Day After Tomorrow* monsoon conditions never matter as long as you've got a handful of your best friends, your breath is visible, and a guy walking his dog joins the fray.

The spirit of public-park football is definitely captured, and magnificently, in *NFL Street 2*. This sequel obliterates its predecessor in every way by looking sharper, being deeper in both gameplay and modes, and featuring an own-the-city mode in which you and a pack of no-names get a rep in the fictional fields of Bay City.

While the game feels like backyard football (and consequently is never played on the street, as the title suggests), it will test those with ADD. The challenges in the own-the-city mode are too straightforward and very rarely inspire you to rush to your next game. If you have the patience for own-the-city mode, the RPG elements let you build your team captain's attributes and dress your team in whatever garb you choose. But the rules of the different games you'll play change too little, after a few hours there's little to motivate you to play another, and there's no story to speak of. You'll square off in occasional (and cool) 1-on-1 or 2-on-2 battles against a pair of 'hood hoods, but for no other reason than...well, that's the next challenge! Why not provide something with a little more character, like "Hey, these guys hear you're up and coming, and they think your game is weak"?

Still, once you're in between the urban lines, the gameplay is tighter than a Peyton Manning spiral. The walls of buildings add great "did you see that!" moments, and the screen-shaking hits will inspire you during goal-line stands.

Football fans will have a great time with this one (especially with multiplayer), and there's plenty there for nonsports folk. But in the end, this one falls just short of greatness.

_Todd Zuniga



PUB EA GAMES
DEV EA TIBURON
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $49.95
PLAYERS 1-4 (ONLINE)
ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR GREAT XZIBIT-ION 9/10

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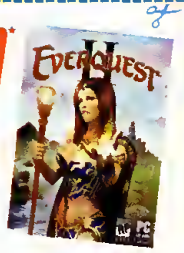


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→ Besting *Zelda* bosses is no easy task—Each of *Minish Cap*'s massive dungeon masters requires Link to reach into his bag of tricks and experiment with creative solutions just to render the foe vulnerable to attack. Remember that items like the gust jar, mole mitts, and the cane of pacci have several different uses.









GMR ESSENTIAL SELECTION

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE MINISH CAP

FASHIONABLE FANTASY HABERDASHERY

EVERYONE | GBA

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
PRICE: $29.99
RELEASE: JANUARY
PLAYERS: 1
ORIGIN: JAPAN

The GBA is a veritable one-stop shop for classic *Zelda* games—you can plow through the original 8-bit *Legend of Zelda*, *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*, and a nifty port of *Zelda: A Link to the Past* (SNES), yet oddly enough, Nintendo has yet to offer up an original GBA quest for Link...until now. *Minish Cap* hails from the same bizarre union between Nintendo and Capcom that birthed the sleeper-hit Game Boy Color *Zelda: Oracle of Ages* and *Oracle of Seasons* games in 2001, and it smacks of a similar spark of creativity. On the surface, it's the same thing you've been playing for nearly 20 years, but a handful of new twists make Hyrule worth revisiting.

Surprisingly, the titular talking cap isn't the real source of the game's innovation. Sure, you'll shrink Link down to micromini size in order to explore, but this gameplay's mostly predictable. True creativity lies in the new equipable items like the gust jar, mole mitts, and Roc's cape. Each of these items has several uses, and you'll constantly be experimenting with them in order to solve puzzles, navigate dungeons, and defeat bosses. And it's those massive, inventive dungeons that provide the meat of *Minish Cap*'s gameplay. When compared with the small, uneventful dungeons in *Link to the Past*, one can see just how far game design has come in a decade.

You won't be able to find any faults with *Cap*'s bright, colorful visuals or peppy remixes of classic *Zelda* tunes, nor will you be able to detract any points for gameplay—action is as smooth and responsive as you'd expect from a *Zelda* game. In fact, outside of a slightly boring midgame stretch in which you're tracking down overdue library books (no, really) and an overly tough final boss, this is a flawless portable adventure. ◀

_Shane Bettenhausen

GMR 9/10 BIG THING LIL' PACKAGE

BETTER THAN A LINK TO THE PAST
NOT AS GOOD AS OCARINA OF TIME (N64)
WAIT FOR IT ZELDA FOR NINTENDO DS

2ND OPINION

Of course this *Cap* brims with brain-straining dungeons, amazing bosses and nifty gadgets—it's a *Zelda* game! But Link lovers will find a lot of fan service, too. There are classic tunes, old-school monsters—even an ocarina. It all makes up for the kinstone collecting and blah parts around the middle. ◀

_Crispin Boyer
Previews editor *EGM*



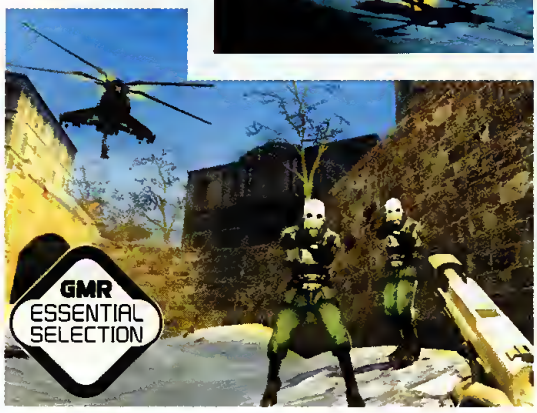








→ Friends from foes: Gordon using his team of antlions to plow through the Nova Prospekt prison is one of *Half-Life 2*'s more memorable sequences. Just throw some bait near the guards and enjoy.



HALF-LIFE 2

VIVA LA RESISTANCE

MATURE | PC

PUBLISHER	VIVENDI UNIVERSAL
DEVELOPER	VALVE
PRICE	$49.95 (STEAM) $54.99 (RETAIL)
RELEASE	AVAILABLE NOW
PLAYERS	1
ORIGIN	U.S.A.

Few games are as significant as *Half-Life 2*. As a sequel to one of the most beloved PC games of all time and a project that commanded an extreme amount of attention during the final phases of its development, *HL2* has a lot to live up to. It's a game rich with atmosphere that features a stellar use of technology and is consistently entertaining. It's also a game that somehow manages to simultaneously fulfill all expectations yet finish with the player unsatisfied and craving for more.

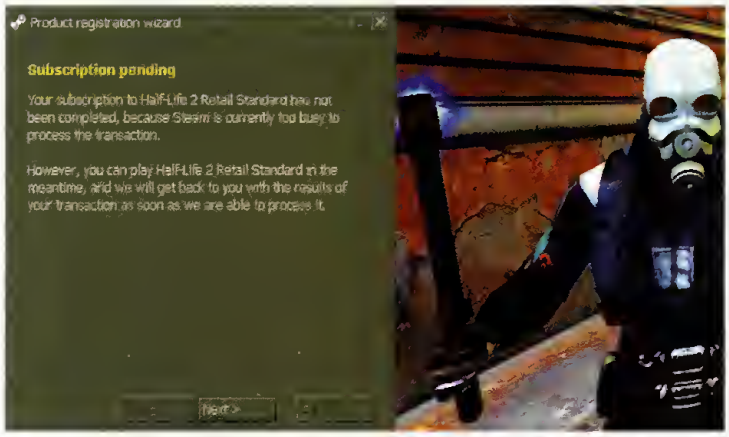
The instant Gordon Freeman steps off the train at City 17, *Half-Life 2* grabs the mind tightly and does not let go. Orwellian themes abound: Jumpsuited civilians with stressed looks wonder why loved ones haven't shown up; automated surveillance bots keep tabs on who is doing what and where; omnipresent video monitors loop the unsettling greetings and menacing diatribes of the city "administrator," who calmly explains why the populace is no longer permitted to reproduce in a manner that almost has you believing he's on your side. Near the plaza, there's a momentary glimpse of a towering beast that patrols the streets, and the masked faces of "civil protection" forces spark their batons as they make dubious arrests. It's a world governed by newspeak, decorated with urban decay, and lacking any hope. Establishing this theme so strongly so early plays to its advantage later in the game as Gordon, crowbar in hand, makes his presence known. This is a revolution. This is *important*. Too many games that would benefit greatly from it fail to generate an epic feel—here, *Half-Life 2* succeeds.

This is the advantage of scripting. Many positive things can be said for open-ended gameplay design that allows for multiple solutions to a problem, but under those conditions it's often difficult to maintain a strong narrative as envisioned by the creators instead of the player. In the hands of qualified authors, scripted events and set pieces contribute significantly to not only how exciting the game can be, but also how memorable it is. Creating a uniquely personal

[DELIVERY FAILED]

CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE

Whatever significant chance Valve had to lure casual gamers back into the PC fold, the company clumsily blew on the day of *Half-Life 2*'s release. Steam, the developer's proprietary distribution channel, was designed to offer consumers an alternative to inconvenient trips to the store to pick up their favorite (Valve-created) games. And for many who chose to ditch the physical box and disc, Steam delivered *Half-Life 2* as soon as electronically possible. But many who picked up their boxed copy on the release day had to endure a lengthy installation and then hours of delayed registration attempts as the Steam servers buckled under launch-day pressure. A single-player game that is dependent upon online authentication and takes many hours to install is unacceptable. Compared to the approximately 15 seconds it takes to start playing *Halo 2* on Xbox, it's just ridiculous. In theory, Steam is a good idea, but as of now, there are too many wrinkles.





→ Boat and buggy sequences break up the on-foot action nicely, even if the controls take a little getting used to. See that magnetic crane? Yep...





gameplay experience and acting out a thrilling scene or action sequence can offer equal entertainment—*Half-Life 2* benefits more from the latter.

It also benefits from some truly amazing artwork and technical prowess. Though it looks perfectly fine on lesser hardware, turning up the max settings makes everything that much sharper, cleaner, and more immersive. Among genuinely emotive facial animation and convincing texture work, what's most impressive is the excellent use of lighting. Whereas *Doom 3* uses light sparingly to emphasize fear of the unknown, *Half-Life 2* uses light and color to paint City 17 and its outlying areas as a bleak, washed-out, and war-torn world. But the game falls short in other technical categories: Surprisingly long and frequent load times take you out of the action, music and sound effects tend to stutter occasionally, and enemy A.I.—presented with a perfect opportunity to utilize squad-based tactics—lacks sophistication. To its credit, Valve has mastered the fine art of pacing: There are very few low points as you take your linear tour through the world, and the moment Gordon acquires the brilliant gravity gun—the toy used to play around with the robust physics engine—is when *Half-Life 2* kicks into full gear.

And it holds you tightly to the very end...when all of the sudden, it just lets go. Much like its predecessor, *Half-Life 2* ends inconclusively—by the time the credits begin to roll, you realize that the story was too busy raising new questions to answer any old ones. The enigmatic G-man welcomes Gordon to City 17 by telling him, "Your hour has come again." After playing through the mostly brilliant *Half-Life 2*, it would be appreciated if Valve doesn't make the world wait another six years for his return.

_Andrew Pfister

GMR ATOMIC **10**/10

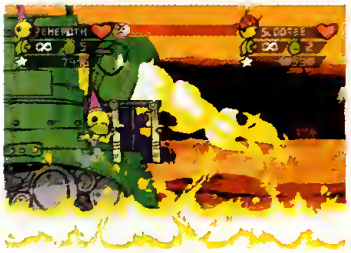
BETTER THAN KILLZONE
ON PAR WITH HALO 2
WAIT FOR IT F.E.A.R.

2ND OPINION

Not the revolution that the first game was, but a worthy sequel and one of the year's best shooters. Valve's pacing, atmosphere, gameplay, and graphics are as brilliant as ever, providing a thrilling experience. Too bad it's so linear and has the worst install process in the history of PC games.

_Jeff Green
Editor-in-chief, *CGW*





PUB 0-3 ENTERTAINMENT PRICE $29.99
DEV THE BEHEMOTH PLAYERS 1-2
REL AVAILABLE NOW ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR INTERSTELLAR 8/10

BETTER THAN: ADVANCE GUARDIAN HEROES
ON PAR WITH: METAL SLUG ADVANCE
NOT AS GOOD AS: VIEWTIFUL JOE

ALIEN HOMINID

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

TEEN | PS2 [REVIEWED] | GC

Here's a game that has been lovingly crafted by old-school game fans keen on paying homage to a glorious time gone by—days when games were games and not artistic statements or botched attempts at outglitzing Hollywood.

Alien Hominid melds the basic concepts from *Contra*, *Metal Slug*, and *Gunstar Heroes* (Shoot stuff! Shoot more stuff!) and gives them a stunning hand-drawn look that you can't help but admire. The eponymous alien is such a happy-looking little guy, and more wit and imagination seem to have been put into just one level than many games have in their entirety. It relentlessly throws bizarre new concepts at you, and assuming you have the balls to make it through, you're going to be overwhelmed with new scenarios and new gameplay ideas. One minute you're piloting a reconstructed flying saucer against FBI helicopters, and the next you're chasing a KGB missile train through the snowy wastes of Siberia. On the way you'll encounter butterscotch pudding monsters that puke on you and enormous mincing machines that you drop bad guys in using a tractor beam. There are parts in which you're forced to be more tactical, but the majority of the gameplay has you blasting away while crap flies everywhere.

The game is by no means perfect, and it's probably too difficult to be enjoyable to everyone. It's a living hell of cheap deaths and unfriendly spawn points, plus it's spectacularly difficult on anything other than Easy mode. This isn't a game that your nongaming partner is going to want to jump into so they can "spend more time with you," because it will kick their ass substantially more vigorously than it will kick yours. If you want to relive the good old days and hate that your favorite 2D franchises are being recast as crappy 3D shooters, give *Hominid* a try.

_John Davison

SEGA SUPERSTARS

GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS

TEEN | PS2

***Sega Superstars* is a rental-worthy title if you're trying to justify buying an EyeToy, but most people over the age of 10 will want to give it a pass. The game transforms 12 classic Sega franchises, including *Monkey Ball*, *Nights*, and *Sonic*, into easy-to-learn minigames. Some are faithful translations of the original works, while others are almost totally unrelated to the games on which they're based.**

These minigames range from clever and responsive—such as the excellent Puyo Puyo minigame that has you guiding colorful bubbles using your arms and head—to completely ludicrous, as in Crazy Taxi, in which you wave your arms and scream in an attempt to "hail" a cab. You'll play many of the games for a minute and never look back, but others will suck you in with their addictive gameplay and get you to beat them on every difficulty level...a feat that should take you all of 10 minutes.

A total gaming novice could easily blow through *Superstars* in a few hours. This is good, because the people who would like *Superstars* are those who don't normally like games. This is absolutely the perfect title to play at a party full of nongamers (but obviously, the party must be extremely lame if it resorts to any EyeToy-related shenanigans).

Even though it's single player, *Superstars* should be played with more than one person in the room (laughing at your friends spastically gesturing is more fun than actually playing the game). But why waste money on *Superstars* when you can buy any number of hallucination-inducing substances to get your friends swatting at the air for a fraction of the price?

_Joshua Cain



→ One of the nice things about *Sega Superstars* is that most games provide so many obstacles you can't get away with furiously waving your arms to make your way through them. One notable exception is Crazy Taxi, in which screaming obscenities and windmilling is not only effective, it's encouraged.





PUB SEGA PRICE $29.99
DEV SEGA PLAYERS 1
REL AVAILABLE NOW ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR CHILD'S PLAY 5/10

NOT AS GOOD AS: EYETOY: ANTIGRAV
SIMILAR TO: EYETOY: PLAY
WAIT FOR IT: A STRONG EYETOY TITLE







→ In a game that's all about blowing stuff up and shooting people, *Mercenaries* surprisingly rewards subtlety. Leveling enemy bases with air strikes is easy, but it'll cost you in the long run, both monetarily and in your relationships with opposing factions. Try using the sniper rifle for long distance kills and quietly planting C4, then detonating it from a safe distance. Remember, if no one sees you do it, they can't blame you for it.





MERCENARIES

FORTUNATE SOLDIER

TEEN | PS2 [REVIEWED] | XB

PUBLISHER	LUCASARTS
DEVELOPER	PANDEMIC
PRICE	$49.99
RELEASE	AVAILABLE NOW
PLAYERS	1
ORIGIN	U.S.A.

You won't be cussing a blue streak and there's nary a prostitute in sight, but don't be mistaken—*Mercenaries* borrows heavily from *Grand Theft Auto*. You control an amoral but likeable killer who can steal any vehicle in sight while exploring a large overworld and performing odd jobs for various factions.

Sound familiar? Unlike *GTA*, the game's focus is purely on action, and it features more weapons, destructible environments, and negotiated artillery strikes than you could shake a rocket-propelled grenade at. The option to call for supplies, munitions, vehicles, and air support at any time adds depth to the otherwise simple combat, especially when enemies start jamming your signal or launching SAM missiles to turn a routine drop into a costly debacle.

"Costly" is a key word, and it's why you don't order a carpet bombing on every grunt you encounter—tactical air strikes don't come cheap. You're a soldier of fortune and you want to turn a profit on every contract you accept. This allegiance to the almighty dollar puts you in an interesting position, forcing you to play the factions off each other. For example, if your mission is directed against a faction you're popular with, you can masquerade as an ally, sneak into the base, detonate the target with C4, and slip out with no one the wiser. It's easier and cheaper than blasting your way in, and everybody stays happy. This flexibility and nonlinearity really add a lot to *Mercenaries*, especially since the objectives lack variety.

When you're not blasting baddies, however, it can get pretty dull. Vehicles aren't much fun to drive and, other than a few little challenges, there's not a lot to do. Good thing blowing stuff up in your hijacked tank doesn't get old quickly. ←

_Joshua Cain

GMR BOUNTY-FUL **8**/10

BETTER THAN: TRUE CRIME: STREETS OF L.A.
NOT AS GOOD AS: GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS
WAIT FOR IT: 25 TO LIFE

2ND OPINION

It's ambitious and daring in concept, but ultimately no more complex than the gang interplay in *San Andreas*. While it encourages sneakiness and cleverness, ultimately you'll find that the most effective and satisfying solution to most problems is to simply blow stuff up. What could be more fun than that? ←

_John Davison
Editor-in-chief, *OPM*

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH

LOTRTS

TEEN | PC

***The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth* is a spectacular work with an attention to detail that rivals the Peter Jackson films upon which it's based. A few game balance issues and technical slowdowns aside, *BFME* further proves how seriously EA takes the *LOTR* license.**

BFME is a real-time strategy game built upon the outstanding *Command & Conquer: Generals* engine developed by veterans from that series and the classic *Red Alert*. The amazing graphics, along with painstaking *LOTR* authenticity—from character design to sound, music, and voice—make *BFME* one of the most exciting RTS games in years.

More *Age of Mythology* than *Rise of Nations*, *BFME*'s gameplay is simple without being shallow. Solo play includes the campaign mode, in which players can choose good (Gondor and Rohan) or evil (Mordor and Isengard) and a skirmish mode that includes 37 scenarios for two to six players.

Both the good and evil paths offer full games on their own, though they start out a bit slow. Good, for instance, begins by just following the fellowship on its journey to Mount Doom. It's not long before that becomes a side story to the eventual 20-plus battle scenarios that only occasionally touch upon the actual events of the films. Most of the game's scenarios are of the standard "establish bases, build units, kick ass" variety and involve either Gondor or Rohan, as well as epic milestones such as the battles for Helm's Deep and Minas Tirith.

BFME is a tactical RTS, so it's strictly about the battles. Resource gathering is thankfully simple, with specific build points on the map for castles, outposts, and settlements. When a building is needed, a click on the predetermined foundation calls up a circular interface with options. This easy interface has the side effect of making *BFME* overreliant on the mouse. Building resources can be a waiting game, and upgrades come slowly.

Hero units are significant in *BFME*, and almost all of them, with the exception of the hobbits, are worth leveling up as quickly as possible. Gandalf and Aragorn are the most impressive. When fully leveled up, each of these guys can call on devastating powers. Gandalf's Word of Power is a sight to behold.

A technical warning, though: System requirements that include 1.3GHz clock speed and 256MB of RAM prove insufficient when there are hundreds of units on screen. The typical unit cap of 300 and the powers of elven archers, Rohan cavalry, eagles, ents, and the Army of the Dead make for an unbeatable force, but one that brings significant framerate slowdown in both solo and online play.

Yet from the charge of the Rohirrim, to the crush of mumakil and trolls, to the final assault on the Black Gate, *Battle for Middle-earth* is an RTS that truly lives up to the word epic.

_Tom Byron

PUB	EA	PRICE	$49.99
DEV	EA LA	PLAYERS	1-8 (ONLINE)
REL	AVAILABLE NOW	ORIGIN	U.S.A.

GMR VICTORIOUS **9/10**

BETTER THAN AGE OF MYTHOLOGY
NOT AS GOOD AS RISE OF NATIONS
ON PAR WITH WARHAMMER 40K DAWN OF WAR



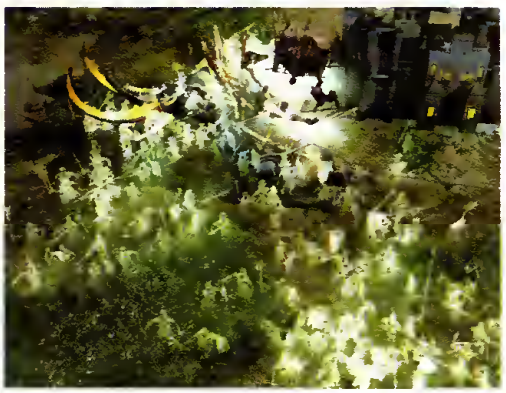
2ND OPINION

BFME does one thing exceedingly well. It really makes you feel like you're in the movies. But by slamming together a bunch of borrowed ideas from other RTS games, you get something really good, just nothing that breaks new ground.

_Darren Gladstone
Senior editor, CGW







BLINX 2: MASTERS OF TIME AND SPACE

DECLAWED

EVERYONE | XB

The original *Blinx: The Time Sweeper* got a bum rap. Though the game is stylish and well designed, the time-sweeping cat was labeled a poor man's Sonic, despite the fact that Naoto Ohshima, one of Blinx's creators, was largely responsible for the development of Sega's famous hedgehog. And it shows in *Blinx 2*, from the crystal-collecting objectives to the old-school *Sonic*-style loading screens. While the first game has its issues (namely a skewed learning curve), it is still a solid action-platformer with a unique time-traveling premise that, to this day, is one of the few games to make good use of the Xbox hard drive.

Blinx 2 doesn't try to do too many new things, it just tries to do old things better. To start, Blinx isn't even the star this time around (although he does figure into the plot). Instead, a player-created custom cat (as designed in the create-a-cat mode) is, in its own insipid way, one of the coolest things ever. Taking kitty through a world of time-based puzzle-filled challenges that looks as good as any of Sonic's recent 3D adventures (and plays even better) is the cherry on top.

A pox, then, on the mandatory tutorials that function as if this is your first videogame. An infuriating cat commander stops you—no kidding—every 10 feet to instruct you on what to do next. This might be bearable if it didn't extend into the actual game. What's the point of showing you the ropes if the game never lets you run free? By the time you're 30 minutes into the adventure and have received your 100th instruction, you'll want to snap the disc in half. Even worse, just as the game gets going, *Blinx 2* switches gears and forces you to take up arms as the away team, namely the pig pirates in the sky. Lame.

While the ability to play through the game cooperatively is a nice touch, it's hardly *Halo 2*. The lack of any online options is another dubious omission that, at the very least, would have added legs to what is a relatively short game. In the end, the foundations of a very solid game are in place: good graphics, a lot of great ideas, and solid controls. It's a shame Artoon didn't have enough faith in the gamer to really let this kitty off the leash.

_James Mielke

PUB	MICROSOFT GAMES STUDIOS	PRICE	$39.99
DEV	ARTOON	PLAYERS	1-4
REL	AVAILABLE NOW	ORIGIN	JAPAN

GMR — CAT SCRATCH FEVER — 7/10

BETTER THAN VEXX
NOT AS GOOD AS PRINCE OF PERSIA WARRIOR WITHIN
WAIT FOR IT PHANTOM DUST





MEGA MAN X8

REFURBISHED REPLOIDS

EVERYONE | PS2

The *Mega Man X* series has fallen on hard times. While it retains a devoted cult following, the last few games in the series have been dismal. The eighth, fortunately, finds the series on the upswing—it's the first game since 1997's *MMX4* that's really worth a look.

Ironically, last year's *X7* was supposed to be the one to bring the series back to prominence. It turned out to be a heap of dumbed-down nonsense and evolutionary dead ends. In contrast, *MMX8* takes the series back to basics; it's still fully 3D, but the 2D gameplay is tuned up to the series' high standards.

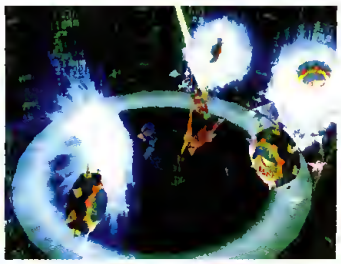
Of course, that means that the game is strictly *not* evolutionary. It's business as usual, in fact, for the most part—but it's some of the best business the series has done in years. The level designs are intricate, offering multiple paths and clever challenges that reawaken that spark of replayability—the hallmark of any good *Mega Man* title.

What keeps the game fresh, when it should by all rights be utterly stale, is its three protagonists. Mega Man X, Zero, and Axl all play very differently. Axl, particularly, been retooled since his less-than-successful debut in the last game, making him versatile and rewarding, and giving the game a bit of *Contra*-esque spice.

These three are the key to what makes the game fun to play, but it would be meaningless if the level designs weren't throwing the right obstacles in your path (the last game had the same three heroes, but even the 2D levels were pretty dreadful). Capcom isn't ignoring the series' history and provides challenges built on time-tested gameplay ideas. Even the few 3D levels, with one exception, manage to provide an addictive challenge this time around.

It's clear that someone at Capcom got frustrated with the way the last several games have turned out, and as gamers we reap the benefits. *MMX8* is the best *Mega Man X* in recent memory and will provide an enjoyable challenge to gamers willing to give 2D another go.

_Christian Nutt



PUB	CAPCOM	PRICE	$39.99
DEV	CAPCOM	PLAYERS	1
REL	AVAILABLE NOW	ORIGIN	JAPAN

GMR — BACK IN GEAR — 7/10

BETTER THAN MEGA MAN X COMMAND MISSION
NOT AS GOOD AS MEGA MAN ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION
WAIT FOR IT MEGA MAN X9, INEVITABLY







→ We all learned in high school science that fire and vampires don't mix. But vamps and leather bondage? A match made in heaven.







VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE—BLOODLINES

A POSITIVE USE OF THE WORD "SUCK"

MATURE | PC

PUBLISHER	ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER	TROIKA
PRICE	$49.99
RELEASE	AVAILABLE NOW
PLAYERS	1
ORIGIN	U.S.A.

As a species, vampires have gotten a raw deal in videogames. Over the years, they've been staked, whipped, boomeranged, and generally humiliated by an endless procession of cookie-cutter heroes. So it's refreshing to see a game that casts them in a positive light, especially when it's rendered with *Half-Life 2*'s engine.

Strapping players into the boots of a newly minted bloodsucker, *Bloodlines* sets them loose in a detailed (if small) version of Los Angeles filled with Goth nightclubs and no shortage of walking juice boxes to prey on. Combat happens in real time, there are multiple paths to goals, and moral decisions must be made at every turn. It's a lot like *Deus Ex*, actually, only with neck biting.

Conversation plays a huge role: As you meet (and run errands for) other "Kindred," you can decide whether to play it nice or hostile, which affects both story flow and future conversation decisions. You can also pick fights, although this isn't usually the smartest course of action. Personality aside, though, *Bloodlines* feels unpolished. Fighting feels a little awkward even after you've leveled up your skills. The load times are long, and occasional bugs disrupt the flow of play.

But while the action might not be outstanding, the game world itself is. Drawbacks are made tolerable by the game's deep story, memorable characters, and clever scripting. *Bloodlines* weaves a convincingly dark atmosphere and even throws in a few genuinely creepy sequences (like a haunted hotel straight out of *The Shining*) for players expecting scares. If nothing else, the hybrid RPG-stealth-action gameplay is compelling and replayable enough to keep gamers occupied until the next *Thief* arrives.

_Mikel Reparaz

GMR TOOTHY **7/10**

BETTER THAN DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR
NOT AS GOOD AS THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS
WAIT FOR IT THE ELDER SCROLLS 4: OBLIVION

2ND OPINION

One of the game's biggest highlights for me was the way the role-playing system lets you create an avatar with a real, heady sense of power. As soon as a patch blunts the myriad rough edges of this game, I look forward to playing through the game again in an entirely different way.

_Robert Coffey
Reviews editor, *CGW*





PUB NINTENDO
DEV HUDSON SOFT
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $49.99
PLAYERS 1-4
ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT 8/10

BETTER THAN: MARIO PARTY 5
WAY BETTER THAN: SHREK SUPER PARTY
WAIT FOR IT: MARIO PARTY ADVANCE

MARIO PARTY 6
SHOUT THE PAATY DOWN

EVERYONE | GC

The number after this game's name tells you most of what you need to know. The *Mario* videogame/boardgames that Nintendo has been churning out year after year follow a successful model—obviously, if they weren't popular, Nintendo would've moved on to something else.

In the videogame world, *Mario Party* is akin to the classic *Chutes and Ladders*, but with minigames after everyone has a turn. As in *Chutes and Ladders*, random events can occur to set you back or bring you ahead in the game, resulting in frustration or glee, depending on your position in the game. And like *Chutes and Ladders*, *Mario Party* is family friendly, so even preschoolers can play.

The challenge of sequels, of course, is coming up with new thrills for the audience. *Mario Party* has always been stuffed with minigames, some based more on chance than skill with the gamepad, and this version is no exception, with 75 new ones. *MP6* is the first *Mario Party* with a day/night feature, which changes the board and minigame selection every few turns.

One big reason to buy this latest version of *Mario Party* is that the player movement has been sped up, so the wait for your turn is no longer interminable. This alone makes *MP6* the new king of the series.

But *Mario Party 6*'s big twist is that some of the minigames are based on voice recognition and are played with a microphone that plugs into one of the memory card slots. These games range from a *Jeopardy*-style quiz show to action games in which you're telling characters which way to move. The voice recognition works very well, which is surprising given how cheesy the mic feels. It's a little gimmicky, sure, but it's also fun and different, and that's the point. *MP6* is just as polished as the rest of the series, striking just the right balance between familiar and fresh material.

_Carrie Shepherd

THE INCREDIBLES
GO BACK TO THE THEATEA

TEEN | XB [REVIEWED] | GC | PC | PS2

Pixar has done it again: *The Incredibles* movie is, yes, incredibly good, a deserving smash success. The game doesn't fare as well.

On the plus side, it looks fantastic, uses music and voices straight from the film, and is easy to pick up and play. Using the Incredible family's powers is definitely fun: Players can punch everything in sight and throw ginormous objects at enemies while in the Hulk-like body of Mr. Incredible, reach faraway foes as Elastigirl, speed down roadways dodging traffic as Dash, and sneak around stealthily as Violet. And of course, there is a point when Violet and Dash combine their force-field and speed powers in the Incredi-Ball. As it should be, this game is fast-paced and action-packed, and does a good job of capturing the urgency of saving the world.

Even with the variety in gameplay, though, *The Incredibles* gets repetitive. There are also annoying control problems that drag the game down. The camera sometimes gets wonky, making it impossible to see where you're going next or what you're aiming at, and the precious second it takes to adjust sometimes costs you your life. And worse, there are just too many spots that require trial and error. While these difficulties do prolong gameplay in the 15 short levels, it's definitely not in a good way. The result is a game that's too hard for beginners but too simplistic to satisfy experienced players. *The Incredibles* is a competent and, at times, genuinely fun platformer, but it will have to rely heavily on its license for a successful run.

_Carrie Shepherd

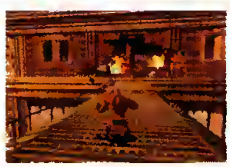
PUB THQ
DEV HEAVY IRON STUDIOS
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $39.99
PLAYERS 1
ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR MORE BELIEVABLE 6/10

BETTER THAN: SHREK
ON PAR WITH: SAMURAI JACK
WAIT FOR IT: CARS



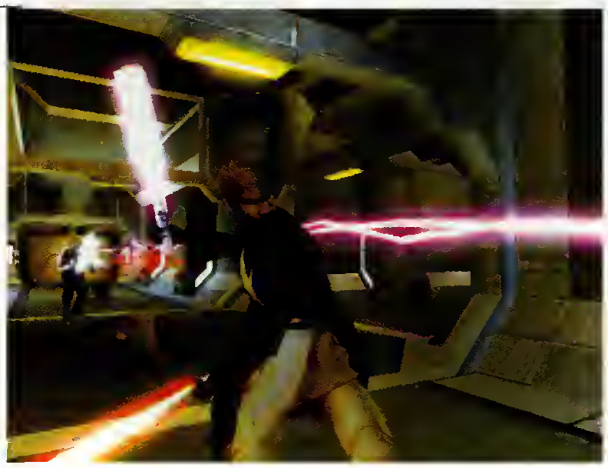
















→ It might take a while to get a lightsaber (depending on what order you tackle the planets in), but once you do, you can easily filet your way through *Star Wars* dudes and beasties with an abandon often described as "reckless." Or not as reckless, if you please.

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

AGAIN, WITH THE STRIKING BACK OF THE EMPIRE...

TEEN | XB

PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS
DEVELOPER: OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT
PRICE: $49.99
RELEASE: AVAILABLE NOW
PLAYERS: 1
ORIGIN: U.S.A.

***Knights of the Old Republic* was the game that brought back the faith of *Star Wars* fans who had lost their way due to the movie prequels. It was an RPG for non-RPG fans, an epic *Star Wars* story that outdid the movies' stories, and the game that brought console recognition to PC developer BioWare (BioWare's craft has always been well received on the PC, but *KOTOR* exposed console gamers to its work). While there has been much apprehension about a sequel that isn't from BioWare, the talented team at Obsidian (crafters of *Planescape: Torment*, *Icewind Dale*, and *Fallout*) have created a pretty good follow-up in *Knights of the Old Republic II*.**

Much like *Halo 2*, *KOTOR II* is a case of "more of the same, thankfully; the same was a nice slice of awesome." While *Halo 2* could be jokingly called *Halo 1.5*, one could refer to this game as *KOTOR 1.25*. That is, much of the overall game itself is nigh-identical to the previous title—the changes between the two are mostly subtle tweaks in gameplay and a darker, more cerebral story.

Actual gameplay is still "talk to people, agree to kill/deliver other people/items, get loot and/or experience." The 0.25 comes from tweaks like instant weapon switching (going from lightsabers to blasters by pressing X instead of going into your inventory), prestige classes, battle stances, a few more powers, and more intraparty interaction. In short, it's a lot of little individual tweaks that make the overall game feel a bit more polished (except in framerate, which still hiccups on occasion). A welcome change is that every party member has a unique ability that's worth using (as in the case of Bao-Dur, a technician with a cybernetic arm that instantly destroys shields and force fields). This translates into harder decisions about whom to use, as everyone has a compelling reason to be played.

KOTOR paired solid writing with the best plot twist in years, and *KOTOR II* ups the ante writing-wise. *Planescape: Torment* had quite possibly the best prose ever written in an RPG, so quality







→ "Force Scream" is one of the new powers that's pretty handy, as it stuns and debuffs your targets. Then again, maybe you're not even using the Force; you might just have the galaxy's worst singing voice.



[SMOOTH TALKER]

POWER OF SUGGESTION

Perhaps the biggest addition to *KOTOR II*, which we expect a large number of players will overlook entirely, is influencing your party members. Like in *Planescape: Torment*, all party members have deep backstories. But you need to win influence over them by paying attention to their personalities and catering to them. The more influence you carry, the more likely they'll trigger their side quests. Also, your influence means that your NPCs align themselves to your alignment, meaning that you can corrupt light-side people or redeem dark-side people, depending on what you do.



writing from Obsidian is somewhat expected, and thankfully delivered. Conversations like being asked to describe what it felt like to use the Force for the first time, or about how even the kindest act can result in unintended and negative consequences, remind people that most other game writing is actually quite terrible. There's a pretty key battle midway through that is conducted entirely with words, in fact.

While *KOTOR* was a rollicking *Star Wars* epic, *KOTOR II* is a slow-burning mystery. It is entirely possible not to get a lightsaber until 15 hours into the game (it does feel quite satisfying once you assemble it, and it makes most battles astonishingly easy as a result)—something that could easily bother fans looking for Jedi action early on. You're given scant clues about what the bigger picture is, beyond, "You're in danger because Sith assassins appear out of nowhere and pick fights with you." While these minor threads are given piecemeal, it all does come together in a plot twist that, while not as earth-shattering as *KOTOR*'s, pretty much explains it all.

The dialogue, while well written, is quite verbose (this is exacerbated by the fact that it's all spoken as well). Even speed-readers will find themselves skipping paragraphs just to keep moving. The slower pacing and wordier dialogue could translate into lots of fans not really knowing what's going on in the story or why things are happening. Some of the quests aren't quite as inspired as *KOTOR*'s, and there are occasional story glitches (a character who is destroyed in a cut-scene shows up A-OK without explanation moments later). Despite all that, though, *Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords* is a fine RPG—it's just not the earth-shattering sequel that people might expect.

_Thierry Nguyen

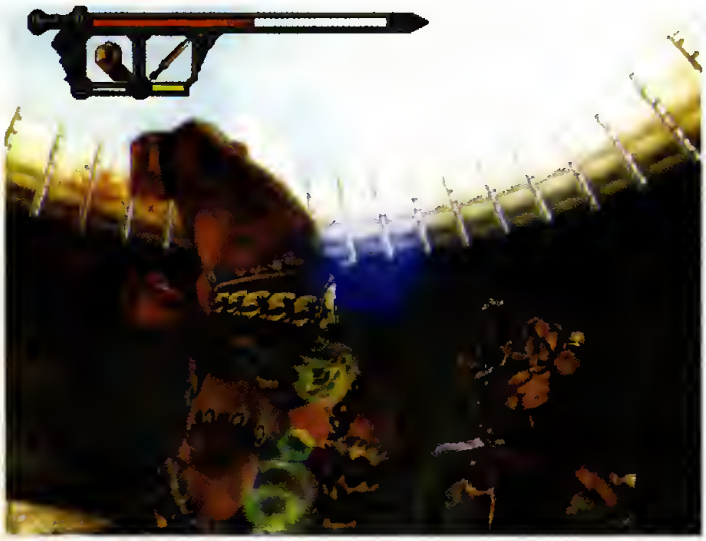
GMR DARK LORD **9/10**

BETTER THAN THE PREQUELS
NOT AS GOOD AS KOTOR
WAIT FOR IT(?) KOTOR III

2ND OPINION

I was disappointed in the recycled planets, and the story and quests didn't captivate me the way they did the first time around. But *KOTOR II* ain't chopped liver! The deep roleplaying and strategic turn-based combat are still among the best the console world has to offer.

_Jennifer Tsao
Managing editor, *EGM*



SHADOW OF ROME

ET TU, BRUTE?

MATURE | PS2

Traveling back to a simpler time when brutal public killings happened for sport and guy-on-guy relationships were cliché, *Shadow of Rome* tells the tale of Agrippa and Octavianus' struggle to uncover the conspiracy of Julius Caesar's murder. It's about time Capcom produced a proper action game that wasn't *Devil May Cry*, and with *Shadow of Rome*, the company the Blue Bomber built steps back into the limelight.

If vicious combat is your thing, *Shadow of Rome* will please; Capcom has developed a seamless and satisfying battle system that allows for easy circle-strafing around enemies and multiple-weapon pickups without interruption. Interaction with the crowd creates additional depth, forcing you to juggle combat-effective moves with crowd-pleasing maneuvers, as a happy crowd leads to unimaginably powerful weapons appearing in the arena. Zeroing in on an enemy can become problematic when specific objectives are required, but you'll be having too much fun dismembering opponents to notice.

It's too bad, then, the adrenalizing pace of the arena combat screeches to a halt during the all-too-frequent Octavianus adventure sequences. Besides removing players from the enthralling combat engine, these levels once again prove most developers can't handle stealth in its most rudimentary form. Much confusion stems from unclear objectives, spotty A.I., and a sluggish pace. The game claims, for example, it's possible to hide a suspicious item behind your back, but good luck actually getting away with it. If there were more things to do with Octavianus besides enduring repeated, unnecessary attacks from the relentless A.I. and constantly crouching around corners, it might have been a welcome breather from Agrippa's nonstop fighting. Instead, it's just an annoying distraction.

Yet there really isn't another game like *Shadow of Rome*, let alone one of similar quality and polish. For anyone who wanted to bash some skulls in the Colosseum after watching *Gladiator*, *Shadow of Rome* will fill that desire, and thankfully, it actually manages to kick ass at it, too.

_Patrick Klepek



PUB CAPCOM
DEV CAPCOM
REL FEBRUARY
PRICE $49.99
PLAYERS 1
ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR SLAIN 8/10

BETTER THAN KING ARTHUR
DOESN'T HAVE RUSSELL CROWE
WANT STEALTH? STICK WITH SNAKE

FATAL FRAME II: CRIMSON BUTTERFLY

TERROR IN 8X10 OR WALLET SIZE

MATURE | XB

Lights off. Surround sound up. Alone. That's how you play this director's cut of *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly*. Go about it any other way and you're simply depriving yourself of one of gaming's most horrific experiences.

Of course, you already expect as much if you played the original *Fatal Frame*. Fully independent of the previous game, *Butterfly* puts you in the Japanese schoolgirl outfit of Mio, who attempts to safely lead twin sister Miyu out of a literal ghost town. A bunch of mumbo-jumbo about "the ritual" ensues, with a story that confuses the hell out of you by design. It's much scarier if nothing makes sense, right?

This includes the ghostbusting camera obscura introduced in the first game, which returns for *Butterfly*. Sound dumb? It is—the idea of creating your own paranormal Kodak moment isn't quite as cool as that of equipping a proton pack. But then again, you're not exactly dealing with Slimer here. One scene—perhaps the scariest of any game ever—pits cameraless Mio against a woman in a bloody white kimono. The screen goes black-and-white as she laughs maniacally, relentlessly chasing you from room to room for 15 strenuous minutes. You learn the hard way that if she touches you once, you die.

Even silence chills you—something will happen, and you know it. When a ghost does appear, the initial jarring shock is soon replaced by genuine—yet somehow desired—discomfort as you engage in a trademark *Fatal Frame* first-person battle through the camera. Xbox-exclusive Dolby 5.1 surround sound enhances the creepiness, so much so that a great sense of relief hits once you've vanquished a ghost to replace its loud moans with silence. That eerie, eerie silence.

If you've already experienced *Butterfly* on PS2, don't let "Director's Cut" fool you into thinking any real gameplay changes have been made. Outside of improved sound, additions are pretty much limited to new novelty modes like survival and FPS. And *Halo 2* this is not. But then, not much else is *Fatal Frame*.

_Chris Baker

PUB TECMO
DEV TECMO
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $49.99
PLAYERS 1
ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR FEAR IT 8/10

BETTER THAN: SILENT HILL 4: THE ROOM
ON PAR WITH: FATAL FRAME
WAIT FOR IT: RESIDENT EVIL 4







SONIC MEGA COLLECTION PLUS

ROLL WITH THE CHANGES

TEEN | PS2 [REVIEWED] | XB

Sonic Mega Collection Plus is a must-have for any fan of Sega's blue mascot. Though he doesn't have the same iconic status as Mario, Sonic is beloved by many and more than deserving of a compilation.

The disc includes virtually every *Sonic* title ever created in the 16-bit era. All seven of the Genesis games are included, as are six titles from the now-defunct Game Gear, though the lack of the rare *Sonic CD* is a bit of a surprising disappointment. It's hard to understand a "collection" that has not once, but now twice omitted the Sega CD classic.

The games are flawlessly emulated, identical to how they first appeared on the Genesis and Game Gear down to the last pixel (including slowdown). One very welcome addition, however, is the inclusion of a Save Anywhere command so players don't have to restart the entire game. Sega has also included four unlockable Genesis games that, bizarrely, have nothing to do with the *Sonic* series. Many of these games were already released on *Sonic Mega Collection*, so if you have that title, skip this one. But if you're new to *Sonic*, for 20 bucks you really can't go wrong.

_Doug Trueman

PUB SEGA | PRICE $19.99
DEV SEGA | PLAYERS 1-2
REL AVAILABLE NOW | ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR SPIN-OFFS 7/10

EASIER THAN ORDERING A GENESIS ON EBAY
NOT AS GOOD AS SONIC HEROES
WAIT FOR IT A MARIO COMPILATION

METAL SLUG ADVANCE

GOOD OLD TINY TANKS

TEEN | GBA

With Konami not much interested in maintaining its own *Contra* franchise in the 2D world, it's fallen to SNK Playmore to pick up the slack with *Metal Slug*. For several years now, the company has plugged away at it, putting out installments on PS2, Xbox, and its own ill-fated NeoGeo Pocket Color. Now, the series makes its debut on the Game Boy Advance.

The usual problem with action games on handhelds is that developers make the sprites impressively large at the expense of visibility range, but *Metal Slug Advance* doesn't fall into this trap. There aren't any leaps of faith onto offscreen platforms, or enemies firing at you from just beyond your range of vision—everything that can deal damage to you is right there where you can hit back.

This hasn't prevented SNK from giving the player large, attractive sprites, either, which is fortunate since that's one of the hallmarks of the series. Also making it over intact from the arcades and consoles are the smooth controls and high difficulty—this is a short game, technically speaking, but it'll feel a lot longer when each of the five stages takes several attempts to complete. Even when you've finally achieved victory over the stage boss, you're not quite done with it—you lose all rescued hostages and found "trading cards" when you die, so while the checkpoints within the level are generously placed, you've got to make it through a stage without dying if you want the rewards. It's a challenging game, but that's *Metal Slug* for you—everything you liked about the previous games, you'll find here, and that's no small feat on a small platform.

_Nich Maragos



PUB SNK PLAYMORE | PRICE $29.99
DEV SNK PLAYMORE | PLAYERS 1
REL AVAILABLE NOW | ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR BULLET TIME 8/10

BETTER THAN: METAL SLUG (NEOGEO POCKET COLOR)
ON PAR WITH: ALIEN HOMINID
WASH OUT THE TASTE WITH: A CASE OF PABST BLUE RIBBON

ATARI ANTHOLOGY

WHEN ONE BUTTON RULED THE WORLD

EVERYONE | PS2 [REVIEWED] | XB

Old-school gamers can finally stop combing eBay and hunting for illegal ROMs, because Atari's got their sugar right here. Imaginatively titled *Atari Anthology*, this disc packs in over 80 classics from Atari's glory days.

At the center of *Anthology* are 18 arcade games, including *Pong*, *Asteroids*, *Tempest*, and the ahead-of-its-time *Major Havoc*, all preserved so perfectly that each title's original cabinet art and controls border the screen. You can even read the manuals for the arcade machines, scanned in page by page.

But what will really get collectors' pulses pounding are the dozens of 2600 titles, some of which have previously been played by only a few. These are a mixed bag, though; the brilliant titles you might remember are here, but for every *Yar's Revenge* or *Adventure*, there's a boring *Stellar Track* or *Slot Machine* (and did we really need *Fun with Numbers*?). Also, the *Pong*-style games really suffer without a paddle controller; *Super Breakout* is almost unplayable. But the quality/crap ratio is balanced out by a ton of bonus stuff, including manuals, comic books, and video interviews.

With its perfect ports of classic titles, startlingly low price, and exhaustively complete bonuses, *Atari Anthology* gets top marks as a collector's dream. But unless you've got serious Atari nostalgia, most of these won't keep you occupied for more than five minutes.

_Mikel Reparaz





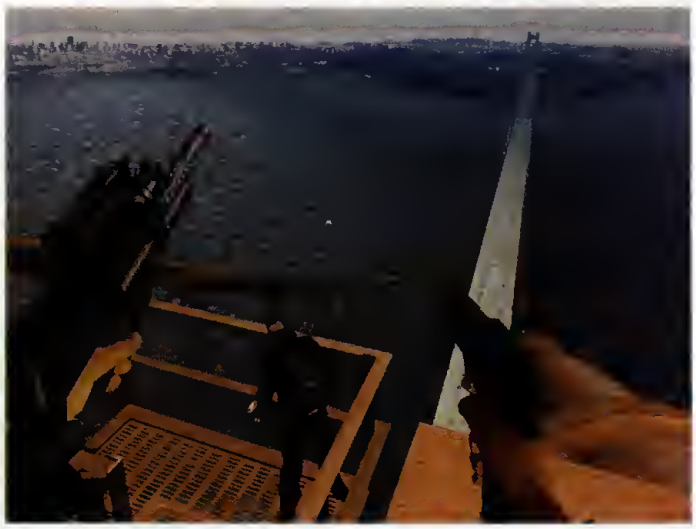
PUB ATARI | PRICE $19.99
DEV ATARI/DIGITAL ECLIPSE | PLAYERS 1-2
REL AVAILABLE NOW | ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR ROOTS 6/10

LIGHTER THAN 80-PLUS CARTRIDGES
NOT AS GOOD AS YOU REMEMBER THEM
ALSO TRY: ATARI FLASHBACK





GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT

DOUBLE OH-NO!

TEEN | XB [REVIEWED] | GC | PS2

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEVELOPER EA LA
PRICE $49.99
RELEASE AVAILABLE NOW
PLAYERS 1
ORIGIN U.S.A.

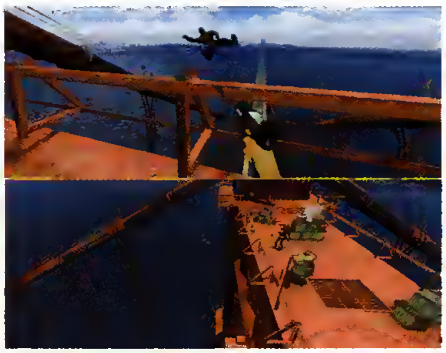
"It's good," says EA, "to be the bad guy." But when that trite tagline comes courtesy of a publisher best known for playing it safe, one has to question its conviction. Bad guys think outside the box, take risks, and don't give a damn what the rest of the world thinks of their ambitious agendas. Yet with *GoldenEye: Rogue Agent*, EA plays its cards carefully and conservatively, and it shows. Wearing a no-holds-barred sense of literalism on its sleeve, this mostly mediocre affair fails to bring anything new to the genre or even match its many peers.

On the surface, *Rogue Agent* is surprisingly plain—the result, perhaps, of too many cooks in the codeshop kitchen? The soundtrack, courtesy of Paul Oakenfold (second, surely, only to Snoop Dogg in terms of cultural relevance), keeps the pace nicely but fails to excite. And while the art direction reveals considerable stylish intent in evoking Bond bad-guy lairs of old, the in-game execution will remind armchair agents of last-generation console games. Clearly crafted with economy (and a simultaneous three-console release) in mind, its lackluster textures, limited palette, and crude effects do little to bring the dark side of James Bond's world to life.

For a first-person shooter, *Rogue Agent* is laboriously linear and shockingly short of any sense of menace. Enemies are unimaginative and repetitious, and at those moments when a more tenacious foe shows up, the right weapons for the job are suspiciously ubiquitous. An even more glaring missed opportunity: Players won't have the chance to do battle with any of Bond's more memorable villains; doubly strange when one considers that the game's entire M.O. revolves around being the best (worst?) bad guy in town. There's precious little here—including the player's GoldenEye powers—that's innovative or, for that matter, compelling. Interaction with other characters—be they friend or foe—is limited to shooting, or taking the occasional hostage. Taking hostages,

[MULTIPLAYER] BONDING WITH FRIENDS

All the requisite multiplayer modes are here, including the option for online play for up to eight agents. Naturally, all four GoldenEye powers—X-ray vision, "hacking," shields, and, uh, repulsion—are included, and the designers have done a fair enough job of enlivening tried-and-true modes such as capture the flag. But while there are plenty of levels to choose from (including Francisco Scaramanga's delightfully campy training grounds) and death traps to keep players on their toes, the core gameplay mechanic leaves so much to be desired that players will likely soon seek out more engaging experiences.











→ Be as bad as you want to be," unless, of course, your target is taking a human shield. Then you're supposed to be a nice guy and not endanger some dude you don't even know. This is the big potential EA wasted. Even when you're a bad guy, you still have to fight bad guys. It's been done.

for example, may tread amoral ground, but when every other onscreen character is a "bad guy," the emotional experience is no different than playing as Bond, sans the smarmy quips. Similarly, the vaunted E.V.I.L. A.I. fails to impress: Enemies seek out errant grenades instead of safety, and hearing some generic soldier shout out, "He's dual wielding!" the moment a second weapon is acquired isn't very impressive the first time around, much less the 100th.

This *Agent* attempts too much and loses focus as a result. It tries too hard to capitalize on gamers' nostalgia (not one to squander a good opportunity, the developers drop the words "golden" and "eye" with unerring frequency), while at the same time trying to reach the broadest possible demographic. It's both brainless and simple, and at one point, husky femme fatale Pussy Galore actually instructs the player to "give props" to Dr. No. Fo' shizzle, Pussy! Wazzzzzup?

Making its mark in a year in which so many games—licensed and otherwise—are reaching near-perfect heights, *GoldenEye* gleams dully. *Halo 2*, *Oddworld Stranger's Wrath*, and *Half-Life 2* all feature first-class first-person thrills with story and style to spare, and when it comes to being bad—really bad—Riddick's escape from Butcher Bay is tops. Tough competition? To be sure, but if you're going to drop ducats just for the right to dub your game the same as something so revered as a dusty old classic...well, you'd better be prepared to go up against the best. That said, if the last first-person shooter you played was *GoldenEye: 007*, you've got a lot to look forward to with *Rogue Agent*. More important, though, you've got a whole lot of catching up to do.

_David Chen

GMR SHORTSIGHTED **5**/10

BETTER THAN: JUDGE DREDD
NOT AS GOOD AS: YOU WANT IT TO BE
IT'S NOT A GOLDENEYE 007 (N64) SEQUEL: BY FAR

2ND OPINION

GE: RA had a ton of potential that wasn't used nearly enough. Ultimately it will be remembered as an exceedingly bland and average FPS which doesn't destroy the memories of the N64 one, but adds new memories that only consist of the word "meh."

_Thierry Nguyen
Previews editor *OPM*



SUIKODEN IV

SINKING SHIPS

TEEN | PS2

Every time Konami has shown off *Suikoden IV*, it has portrayed the game as a return to form after the convoluted and flawed *Suikoden III*. It's true that *Suikoden IV* is back to basics. But there's such a thing as going too far, and that's precisely what the team behind this game has done.

That's not to say *Suikoden IV* is a bad game. It's merely a bland and barren one—two things an RPG should never, ever be. In a genre so reliant upon the worlds it builds for gamers, it's a cardinal sin to offer up one as featureless and empty as *Suikoden IV*'s. And in a genre that stakes so much on its combat systems, *Suikoden IV*'s is unpardonably simplistic. So while sailing the high seas looking for adventure sounds exciting in theory, in reality it just boils down to autopilot and endless dull random battles.

Of course, an RPG is also founded upon its story and its characters. Here, *Suikoden IV* fares much better. While the beginning is pretty typical, *Suikoden IV* becomes genuinely interesting by its final third, and although its hero is unconvincing, the supporting cast has the strong characters it needs to make up for that. As is par for the course with *Suikoden*, there are 108 different characters—and a few of them are interesting and likable enough to keep the story's head above the surf during its most waterlogged moments.

The implicit task of a sequel is to add new innovations while still retaining the wonderful ideas that let a single game become a series. *Suikoden IV* is an attempt to simplify and also redefine what *Suikoden* is. But it's been streamlined much too much—redefined as absolutely average. As series go, *Suikoden* doesn't have the lengthy history of, say, *Final Fantasy*. If Konami keeps making games like this, it may never get the chance. When compared to the most recent game in the series, *Suikoden IV* may seem like a fresh start, but when contrasted against the PS1 *Suikoden* games or its PS2 RPG competition, it comes up short.

_Christian Nutt



PUB	KONAMI	PRICE	$49.99
DEV	KCE TOKYO	PLAYERS	1
REL	JANUARY	ORIGIN	JAPAN

GMR 5/10 LEAKY

BETTER THAN NOT MUCH
WEAKEST GAME IN THE SERIES
GO FIND A USED COPY OF SUIKODEN II (IT'S WORTH IT)

FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST

YOU, SIR, ARE METAL

EVERYONE | PS2

The nice thing about *Fullmetal Alchemist* that you don't always get in a licensed game (whether licensed from movies, comics, anime, or what have you) is that the gameplay actually seems inspired by and drawn from the source material, rather than simply being generic with some recognizable characters plugged in.

As a state alchemist, main character Edward Elric can transmute everyday objects into whatever the situation requires, and the game does a good job of using Elric's powers in relevant ways. Nearby things like rocks and telephone poles can be charged up and changed into a variety of helpful weapons like pikes, swords, bombs, and even gun emplacements, effectively turning the entire environment into a weapon.

It's a fitting concept and a great start, but hopefully the next game will do a little better in the execution. *Fullmetal Alchemist* is an action-RPG, so you'll spend most of your time in combat. Unfortunately, the all-important fighting engine is a little busted. Like many beat-em-ups, the engine revolves around combos, but the move buffer is so tiny and short that you have to know all the button presses in the combo you want to do and enter them immediately, rather than chain moves together on the fly.

You also get a partner in the form of your brother Alphonse, a giant suit of armor without a body inside. Alphonse's A.I. is decent, but it's mostly sufficient since you can give him context-sensitive commands—if you're near a weapon he can pick up, you can tell him to do so, and if he's near enemies, you can order him to ram into them. Unfortunately, his A.I. doesn't come into play when executing your commands; he tends to ram into whatever you're looking at rather than whatever enemy he is closest to, which is a problem when you're trying to use him to cover an escape.

The trappings of the show are at least faithfully represented; the English dubbing by the anime's main cast isn't half bad, and it's a nice gesture to have so much original animation created specifically for the game. Large, crisp character portraits show up during dialogue, and the in-game models are rendered well. The show has a nifty premise, and fans will be happy that the game stays so true to it, but if they want more out of their games than fidelity to the source material, they may want to wait for a sequel.

_Nich Maragos

PUB	SQUARE ENIX	PRICE	$49.99
DEV	SQUARE ENIX	PLAYERS	1
REL	JANUARY	ORIGIN	JAPAN

GMR 6/10 BRONZE

BETTER THAN VIRTUA QUEST
NOT AS GOOD AS FRONT MISSION 4
WAIT FOR IT JADE EMPIRE





→ Team Soho has revamped the "lean" system that is used in place of magical and oddly placed health packs. Now it doesn't take as long to regain your health, but you can only lean so many times before it stops working. Don't blame the game, *that's just how science works.*







→ *Black Monday* adds motorcycles because motorcycles are so hot right now.



THE GETAWAY: BLACK MONDAY

SOMEONE'S GOT A BAD CASE OF THE MONDAYS

MATURE | PS2

PUBLISHER: SCEA
DEVELOPER: SCEE (TEAM SOHO)
PRICE: $49.99
RELEASE: AVAILABLE NOW
PLAYERS: 1
ORIGIN: U.K.

Sony's original *The Getaway* garnered largely positive reaction from gamers for its unique storytelling and impressive London environment. But hiding an otherwise mediocre game behind story and setting doesn't work twice.

Once again, you feel like Team Soho wanted to make a movie more than it wanted to make a game—yet *Black Monday*'s story is downright terrible. Sure, the cut-scenes look amazing, but telling a story out of order just doesn't work in a videogame. *Pulp Fiction* succeeds using this structure because you're focused on its memorable, funny characters and the stuff that happens to them for two-plus uninterrupted hours. *Black Monday* fails at this, however, because you couldn't care less about its forgettable, humorless characters, and you lose focus on what's actually happening with them because gameplay removes you from the core storytelling moments for 30 minutes at a time.

Whether you like that half-hour between cut-scenes largely depends upon the game chapter at hand. Driving missions generally rock, whether you're pursuing or being pursued, and London is your playground. Cars, motorcycles, and even bicycles handle quite well, and it's neat to hear police chatter. Not so for the on-foot missions, which comprise about 70 percent of the action in a shoddy, shoddy way. Control never feels intuitive, the camera shifts relentlessly, and you find yourself laughing for the wrong reasons: Thugs calmly wait for Mitch to cuff a fellow bad guy before they resume fire. Security guards shoot to kill an unarmed teenage girl. And flat-out thug Eddie shows enemies who's boss with sloppy, unintentionally hilarious fisticuffs. With a humor-free script, you might as well laugh somewhere.

_Chris Baker

GMR ELUSIVE **6/10**

ON PAR WITH TRUE CRIME: STREETS OF L.A.
NOT AS GOOD AS ANY PS2 GRAND THEFT AUTO
SIGNIFICANTLY MORE "F" WORDS THAN BARBIE HORSE ADVENTURES



DS LAUNCH!

NINTENDO'S QUIAKY NEW HANDHELD HAS AAAIVED: LAUNCH GAMES AAE AEVIEWED, AND GMA OPINES...

NINTENDO DS

A NEW WAY OF LOOKING AT THINGS?

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It's the games that make systems worthwhile, so in lieu of a numerical score for the DS hardware, the *GMR* editorial staff sounds off with personal impressions of the hardware and its potential.



Tom Byron
I was an early proponent of the DS, but now that it's out, I don't know what to make of it. It's big and bulky and playing with the stylus is clumsy. The second screen seems to be just that: a second—and superfluous—screen. I've played *Madden*, *Metroid Prime: Hunters*, and *The Urbz* so far. Hey, these all look and play great, but couldn't Nintendo have produced these same games on a single-screen GBA SP2? Yeah, it could have even implemented a touch screen. Ah, but no worries: Nintendo still has time to prove the viability of the DS—at least until March when the PSP hits.

James Mielke
Conceptually, I'm in love with the DS. In reality, I'm scared that developers will use the two screens for really lame crap like menus. Take *Ridge Racer DS* for example. NST put a digital/analog steering wheel on the second screen, which is just a half-assed option offering unreliably twitchy control. Couldn't it have put the rearview mirror or something useful down there? Just as no one except for a couple of savvy developers utilized the freakin' Xbox hard drive, so too the second screen may languish in disuse. I think it'll take Miyamoto to really show the world something mind-blowing as to how the DS can be used to its full potential. Otherwise, I'm ambivalent about the DS. GBA games look great on it (way better than on GBA SP), but the graphics look like PlayStation-quality textures with N64-powered 3D, meaning that now you can see how blocky N64 games were without all the fuzz, à la *Super Mario 64 DS*. Do I want a DS? Yeah. Am I blown away by the system's first games? Not really.

Carrie Shepherd
I was wary of the DS since its announcement—can a stylus and two screens really revolutionize gameplay, or is it just a gimmick designed to get me to spend money on a new gadget? Now that I've spent many hours using it, I find the dual screens almost superfluous, but the touch screen and stylus work really efficiently. Even though initially the system felt kinda cheap and plastic-y to me, it's been holding up very well, including the touch screen—which got some vigorous use, primarily in the form of many inane junior-high-like messages sent to friends at the other end of the dinner table during a holiday meal.

Christian Nutt
The DS is a respectable unit, but I'm more moved by games than systems, so I'm not a fan just yet. I do respect Nintendo's design principles, though. The system is durable, compact, and still pretty powerful. I love how responsive the touch screen is and how clear and well-lit the screens are. The stereo sound is a big, big upgrade over the GBA's tinny mono, too. The game cards are also just the right size—you'll be able to carry dozens but not lose 'em. Sure, it may not be PSP powerful—I just wonder whether it can compete with GBA and, later in its life, the next Game Boy.

Andrew Pfister
I'm with James. In theory, the DS is a great idea. The dual screens, touch sensitivity, and wireless play open up new creative avenues for developers. The only problem is that if we look at the launch lineup, it doesn't *force* developers to be creative. It won't be until *Advance Wars* when Nintendo itself uses the two screens in a truly exciting way, and the remainder of what's been announced has failed to impress. I know on a certain level the comparison is unfair, but after seeing PSP games in motion, I really don't want to go back to PlayStation and N64-era visuals. By no means do I think this is a Virtual Boy-caliber mistake, but until I see something great that can't be done on a single-screened console or PDA, I remain hopefully unimpressed.

SUPER MARIO 64 DS

MARIO MAKES THE SCENE

EVERYONE | DS

Nintendo releases a new portable system. Nintendo ports a classic *Mario* game to it. Business as usual, right? Not quite. *Super Mario 64 DS* sports the most substantial upgrade a portable *Mario* remake has ever received. Of course, not every addition is a compelling one, and it's vital to note that the game hasn't made it to the DS completely unscathed, either.

In 1996, *Super Mario 64* was much more than the sum of its parts, and so, too, is this version. It doesn't hurt that there are more parts this time, either. Mario is joined by Yoshi, Luigi, and Wario on his adventure. Each character has a unique feel and is suited to different tasks and player styles, offering welcome variety. But the DS also introduces control flaws. Neither the D-pad nor touch-screen controls are as good as an analog stick, and this results in missed jumps and frustrating, cheap deaths.

The game, in all of its star-grabbing glory, is otherwise mostly identical to the original version. Thirty new stars have been sprinkled around the castle. Bits of the original levels have been remixed, and some entirely new areas have been stapled on. It's enough new material to keep the game fresh.

On top of that, touch-screen minigames (great time killers) and wireless multiplayer (a nice try, but there aren't enough options to keep you playing for more than few matches) round out the package.

Super Mario 64 DS takes an excellent original game, loses some ground on control, but gains it back with variety. Its goal-based structure, in a happy accident, renders it perfect for portable play. If there was a question in your mind that *Mario 64* had enough longevity to be worth playing in 2004, the answer is yes.

_Christian Nutt



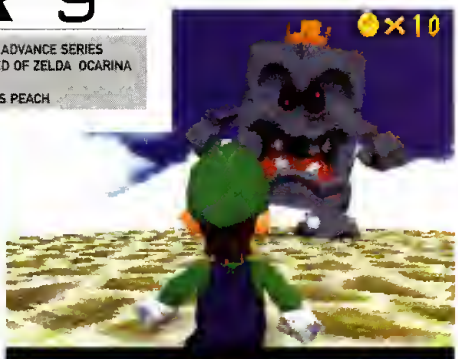




PUB	NINTENDO	PRICE	$29.99
DEV	NINTENDO	PLAYERS	1-4
REL	AVAILABLE NOW	ORIGIN	JAPAN

GMR TIP-TOP **9**/10

BETTER THAN SUPER MARIO ADVANCE SERIES
NOT AS GOOD AS THE LEGEND OF ZELDA OCARINA OF TIME
WAIT FOR IT: SUPER PRINCESS PEACH





















RIDGE RACER DS

THAT SLOPPY FIRST KISS

EVERYONE | DS

It's too bad it's not 1996, a time when racing games were simply that, offering little more than a small selection of tracks and a handful of cars for players to race with. If that were the case, *Ridge Racer* for the DS would not only meet most anyone's expectations, it would surpass them.

This iteration of *Ridge Racer* offers a broad selection of tracks from a variety of past *Ridge Racer* titles (including *Ridge Racer Revolution*), as well as a sizable stable of cars, many of which are unlocked in exciting 1-on-1 race challenges. This is, in fact, an upgraded port of the old *Ridge Racer* title for the Nintendo 64. While what's offered is enough to satisfy die-hard *Ridge Racer* fans, a few notable things hold it back from greatness.

First, the graphics, while possessing a solid framerate and glitch-free line of sight, look like a direct port from the PlayStation era. While one would normally be thankful for such prowess on a handheld, one needs only to look to the upcoming *Ridge Racers* for Sony's PSP handheld for a real glimpse of the future. *RRDS* just feels pedestrian by comparison. The other thing holding the game back is its failure to put the dual screens to good use. While normal digital control is fine, the analog-style control offers more precise cornering, but in practice, it's awfully twitchy. The screens might have been put to better use emulating the rear-view mirror that's missing from the main screen.

As a package, *Ridge Racer DS* is competent on all levels, offering solid if unexceptional value. However, with the upcoming *Need for Speed Underground 2* for the DS bound to offer more actual incentive to race, this is worth a passing glance. ◀

_James Mielke

PUB NAMCO
DEV NST
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $29.99
PLAYERS 1-6
ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR RETREAD 6/10

BETTER THAN: RIDGE RACER REVOLUTION (PS1)
NOT AS HANDSOME AS: RIDGE RACER FOR PSP
WAIT FOR IT: NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2

ASPHALT URBAN GT

CELL PHONE RINGER

EVERYONE | DS

It's an unwritten rule that a new system must launch with at least one racing game. The DS is fortunate enough to have two right out of the gate, and surprisingly, Ubisoft's *Asphalt Urban GT* manages to hold its own against the *Ridge Racer* pedigree.

Developed by Gameloft, primarily a maker and porter of mobile cell phone games, *Asphalt* could easily have been a decent N64 title back in that console's heyday (not something that can easily be said for most N-Gage games). The requisite racing game standards are present: arcade mode, time trial, multiplayer, and career modes; an adequate selection of cars and car classes; interesting and well-designed tracks—though it's on a portable, *Asphalt* is still a well-rounded racer. The career mode in particular offers more than expected.

But it's slightly hampered by its portable nature. A muddy and cluttered horizon often obscures turns and oncoming traffic, as do the limited camera angles. Fortunately, the penalty for running head-on into traffic is negligible, and the minor pop-up and draw-in that occurs is offset by a smooth and steady framerate. Even the controls are good, despite the lack of analog steering. Powersliding around turns can be hairy, especially in a fast car, because most of the turns don't seem to be designed for wide, sweeping angles.

The decision to make multiple cartridges necessary for wireless multiplayer is a disappointing one, and though multiplayer is smooth and steady once it's up and running, there isn't much in terms of interface and options.

Asphalt Urban GT does nothing extraordinarily special, nor is the DS hardware exploited beyond a map, but having two competent racers at the launch of the system is a pleasant surprise. ◀

_Andrew Pfister

PUB UBISOFT
DEV GAMELOFT
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $29.99
PLAYERS 1-4
ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR IT'S OK 6/10

BETTER THAN: THE N-GAGE VERSION
ON PAR WITH: RIDGE RACER DS
WAIT FOR IT: RIDGE RACER (PSP)







SPIDER-MAN 2

DOWN CAME THE RAIN

EVERYONE | DS

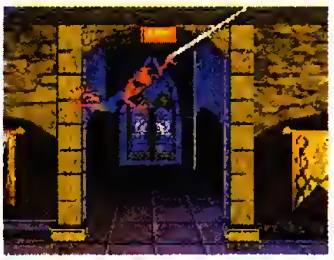
There is a temptation to forgive the shortcomings of games that accompany the launch of a new system. Developers are often given little time to flesh out their ideas, and in the case of the DS, incorporating the use of two screens and touch sensitivity is even more demanding. *Spider-Man 2* actually manages to make use of the touch screen in an interesting, though not vital, manner. It's too bad that the rest of the game is awful.

Take away the impressive graphics, tight control, and fun web movement, and what's left is a hacked-up version of the movie plot and a style of play that was considered poor back in 1992. Every level (that isn't a boss fight) in *Spider-Man 2* boils down to a hunt for thugs, hostages, or thugs who are holding hostages. For more than half of the game, this vigilante work occurs in a sprawling NYC neighborhood that quickly becomes as stale as Spidey's combat. Special moves, selected by pressing the touch screen, can only be unlocked by meeting unreasonably difficult time and health goals. And there's not even an incentive to do that, as a standard punch, punch, kick sequence will suffice for most of the game...unless you are battling a boss, in which case agile evasion and plain dumb luck become a factor.

Whereas the console versions of *Spider-Man 2* managed to cover up awkward combat and repetitive tasks with great control and the impressive scale of a rendered New York City, the DS version is confining, irritating, and, despite the use of new technologies, archaic. The other use of the touchscreen—puzzlelike minigames—would be novel if it weren't inaccurate without switching over to a stylus.

The danger of launch software: Just because it's available doesn't mean it's acceptable.

_Andrew Pfister



PUB ACTIVISION — PRICE $39.99
DEV VICARIOUS VISIONS — PLAYERS 1
REL AVAILABLE NOW — ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR TANGLED 3/10

BETTER THAN THE PC VERSION
NOT AS GOOD AS THE CONSOLE VERSIONS
WAIT FOR IT. ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN

MR. DRILLER: DRILL SPIRITS

THE THRILL OF THE DRILL

EVERYONE | DS

Namco occasionally likes to revisit its old-school arcade roots. 2000's *Mr. Driller* was one of those throwbacks; though there wasn't much to the game, it was addictive in its straightforwardness. *Drill Spirits* adds quite a bit to the first game's mix without losing that essential simplicity.

You still take control of a squeaky little guy named Susumu and use his man-sized drill to burrow into several kilometers of stratified pastries while battling the forces of suffocation and gravity. This time, he's brought along half a dozen friends and relatives, each of whom offers a slightly different balance of skills to suit a wide variety of player preferences. Also in tow are a few new tricks to make use of the DS' unique abilities.

By far the most practical feature is the wireless multiplayer action. Supporting up to four participants (who must provide their own carts, unfortunately), the competitive games include both races and battles that add a vital element sorely missing in the older game. Meanwhile, the touch-screen stylus support is mostly for looks, a showy gimmick that ultimately proves less precise than the old-fashioned D-pad approach.

The dual-screen pressure driller mode, on the other hand, is great. It adds the extra threat of a giant Susumu-shaped evil robot that's constantly bearing down on your hero from the upper screen. It can be held off and even destroyed with missiles, but trying to protect yourself while avoiding standard *Driller* hazards makes for an exciting experience.

These additions definitely give the game more shelf life than the original, but perhaps not enough to completely solve a common complaint about the series: It's simple and shallow. *Drill Spirits* is fun but not especially satisfying for longer stretches.

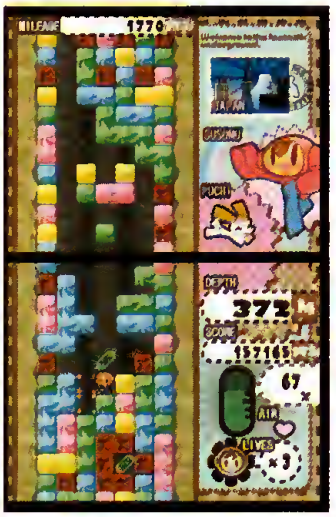
Driller games tend to have a lot in common with the layers of cookies and cakes you're constantly digging through—sweet, but best in small doses. Still, it's hard to ask for more from a portable puzzler, which makes *Drill Spirits* a tasty (if not completely filling) morsel of gaming goodness.

_Jeremy Parish

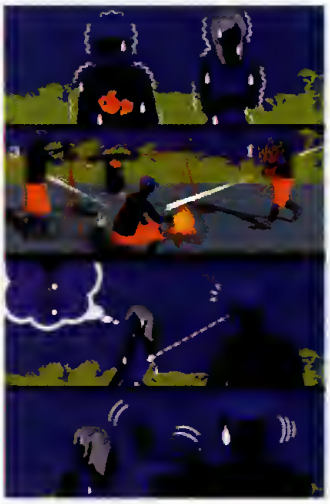
PUB NAMCO — PRICE $29.99
DEV NAMCO — PLAYERS 1-4
REL AVAILABLE NOW — ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR SNACKABLE 7/10

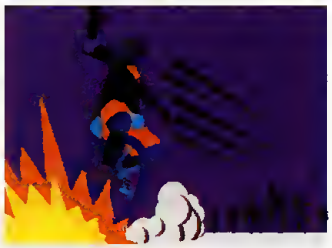
BETTER THAN MR. DRILLER
NOT AS GOOD AS THE JAPANESE RELEASE!
WORTH IMPORTING MR. DRILLER: DRILL LAND











PUB SEGA
DEV SONIC TEAM
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $29.99
PLAYERS 1
ORIGIN JAPAN

GMR CRUSH 7/10

BETTER THAN SPRUNG
NOT AS GOOD AS ALAS, REAL LOVE
WAIT FOR IT. WARIOWARE TOUCHED!

FEEL THE MAGIC: XY/XX

THE BENEFIT OF BUSY HANDS

EVERYONE | DS

Love is patient, love is kind. Love is swimming through the innards of a giant snake and then flinging pedestrians at your rivals with a truck-mounted slingshot. And though it's hard to fall completely in love with *Feel the Magic: XY/XX*'s unique style and intelligent use of the DS' abilities, the possibilities are worth pursuing.

An excellent appetizer for *WarioWare Touched!*, *Feel the Magic* takes a similar approach: nonsensical, fast-paced microgames loosely held together by an empty-calorie plot and the zany antics of its participants. The visual look—silhouettes wearing clothes—and the upbeat music lend to *Feel the Magic*'s goofy charm, as does the whole "boy meets girl, boy joins avant-garde performance troupe to impress girl" motif. The microgames make good use of the touch-sensitive screen (most involve rubbing or tapping), the second screen on top, and even the microphone. Of the DS' launch lineup, *Feel the Magic* best represents what the hardware is capable of; it's a complete aesthetic and mechanical package.

But while *Magic* matches *WarioWare* in presentation, it lacks the variety and sheer volume of games to play. Players can partake in 32 activities—which include some repeats—and the story ends rather quickly. Everything you successfully complete is unlocked and can be played independently (with additional levels of difficulty and some new outfits to unlock for your special ladyfriend), but only a few of them are worthy of replaying.

Yet *Feel the Magic* is definitely a fresh experience the first time through, and it effectively demonstrates what truly creative developers ought to be doing with the DS hardware. To put it in relationship terms, for now, we're just friends...but we'll see where it goes from there.

_Andrew Pfister

SPRUNG

HOOKING UP IS HARD TO DO

TEEN | DS

Wait a second...one of the first few DS titles is a dating simulator? How did this happen? Desperate fanboys have dreamed of getting one of Japan's myriad "gal games" Stateside for years to no avail, and some French dudes just hand-deliver one to Nintendo's fledgling portable. Bizarre. Well, you've gotta give them credit for trying, but *Sprung* probably won't do much to establish the genre in the United States—it's far too contrived and boring to titillate.

You begin your romantic conquest by choosing either Becky or Brad, two clean-cut teens spending a week at a ski resort. Your goal: Hook up with members of the opposite sex. You won't be getting any nookie without effort, though—you'll have to master the ancient art of conversation if you're going to go for the proverbial roll in the hay. Trouble is, the conversation-tree gameplay feels terribly limiting. There's usually only one correct dialogue path leading to the end of each chapter, and in some instances, you actually have to talk about different subjects in the correct order to proceed. Often, what's supposed to be funny, sexy small talk turns into pure frustration when you have to replay the same scene numerous times. Funny writing is all but wasted on dull, repetitive gameplay.

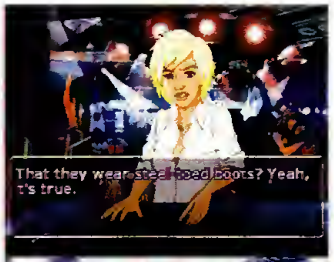
Sprung also fails to capitalize on the DS' unique technical capabilities, failing to use the DS' touch screen in any meaningful way—it's actually faster and easier to use the D-pad and buttons to select your answers.

_Shane Bettenhausen

PUB UBISOFT
DEV GUILLEMOT
REL AVAILABLE NOW
PRICE $29.99
PLAYERS 1
ORIGIN FRANCE

GMR RECOIL 4/10

BETTER THAN STALKING THE NEW GIRL
NOT AS GOOD AS AN ACTUAL DATE
WAIT FOR IT. A LOVING RELATIONSHIP









→ Now you don't have to get all gussied up and go out on the town to get some creepy dude to clumsily hit on you. And yes, it is true: All blondes can speak fluent Arabic and pilot helicopters.







MADDEN NFL 2005

DON'T LOOK SO SHOCKED

EVERYONE | DS

EA's unsurprising entry into the DS' rookie lineup—*Madden NFL 2005*—offers a solid showing for those who need a new *Madden* with their new system, but while it does a lot right, it lacks the polish the series is known for.

Though the player models could be better, the 3D graphics look good on the small screen. More notable, though, is the touch-screen implementation. Being able to use your stylus to pick plays, call audibles and hot routes, and kick and pass the ball works well, and the second screen displays a useful Xs and Os breakdown of the action during each play. Toss in a decent season mode and solid gameplay and you've got a nice package.

Problem is, the DS' *Madden* suffers from a few quirks rarely seen in the series. The spotty A.I. has a strange habit of calling fake kicks way too frequently, and it isn't all that hot at clock management. Also, the ball is sometimes hard to follow, and all that cool touch-screen stuff doesn't work in the otherwise smooth multiplayer action. Still, *Madden* offers a good game of football.

_Greg Ford

PUB EA SPORTS | PRICE $39.99
DEV EXIENT | PLAYERS 1-2
REL AVAILABLE NOW | ORIGIN U.K.

GMR FORWARD PROGRESS 7/10

BETTER THAN ANY OTHER PORTABLE FOOTBALL GAME
NOT AS GOOD AS ITS BIG BROTHERS
WAIT FOR IT MADDEN PSP

THE URBZ: SIMS IN THE CITY

BIG THINGS COME IN SMALL PACKAGES

EVERYONE | DS

It's pretty rare that the handheld version of a game outdoes its console brethren, but that's definitely true of *The Urbz*. *The Urbz* for DS is a far richer, more compelling experience, and manages to not feel repetitive even as you work to build up your character's motives, skills, and rep.

Aided tremendously by a story line incorporating an evil landowner, a vampire, and a time machine in the New Orleans-like city of Miniopolis, *The Urbz* feels a lot less like an endless to-do list and a lot more like a full-fledged adventure with plenty of extras. Not only does the game include a robust cooking system à la *Harvest Moon*, it also allows you to run errands, receive packages, buy furniture, paint pictures, visit islands, and play minigames like in *Animal Crossing*. The missions and environments are well paced and imaginative—with surprises and plot twists—and conversations don't feel excessively repetitive.

For the most part, the game is identical to *The Urbz* for GBA, with one additional DS-specific mission, which melds well into the main story line. On the DS-exclusive island, a couple of stylus-based minigames are supplemented by a pet show card game, as well as a rent-free vacation home to furnish. Using the touch screen to access inventory is intuitive and seamless.

In short, it's not just a location change for *The Sims*: The superior writing of *The Urbz* makes it far better than its predecessor *Bustin' Out*. There aren't many handheld titles this solid, so pick up this shizzle.

_Carrie Shepherd



PUB EA GAMES | PRICE $39.99
DEV MAXIS/GRIPTONITE GAMES | PLAYERS 1
REL AVAILABLE NOW | ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR SLICKER 9/10

BETTER THAN THE URBZ FOR CONSOLES
ALMOST AS GOOD AS ANIMAL CROSSING
WAIT FOR IT ANIMAL CROSSING DS

PING PALS

ONE OF THE WORST THINGS. EVER

EVERYONE | DS

You probably already know that your Nintendo DS hardware comes pre-equipped with PictoChat, a free messaging program that allows up to 16 players to chat with a virtual keyboard or by drawing with the stylus. It's efficient, cleanly designed, and easy to use. What you might not know is that THQ has conspired to sell you a tacky (not to mention incompatible) replacement for PictoChat that offers some questionable additional content yet actually lacks several features of the software you already have. This nefarious product is called *Ping Pals* and may go down in history as the least necessary game of all time.

On a basic level, *Ping Pals* offers fewer chat options than PictoChat—here, you can't choose the width of your pencil nor can you erase everything you've drawn with a simple click. Also, the actual drawing area is smaller than PictoChat's. As a trade-off for this functionality, you receive the ability to customize a creepy, Bratz-like avatar and play rudimentary games like Guess the Number and Hot Potato—creative PictoChatters could easily re-create them with little effort. You don't need this...in fact, nobody needs this.

_Shane Bettenhausen

PUB THQ | PRICE $19.99
DEV WAYFORWARD | PLAYERS 1-16 (ONLINE)
REL AVAILABLE NOW | ORIGIN U.S.A.

GMR WORTHLESS 0/10

BETTER THAN CONTRACTING A LIFE-THREATENING DISEASE
NOT AS GOOD AS PICTOCHAT
WAIT FOR IT UH, PICTOCHAT 2?



RETROACTIVE

IT'S A WORLD OF REVOLUTION, A WORLD OF FEAR—IT'S AN ODDWORLD AFTER ALL

STRANGER AND STRANGER

LORNE LANNING AND A HISTORY OF ODDWORLD

Everyone loves a good Western—the chases, the gunfights, the steely eyed gazes at the horizon. But *Oddworld Stranger's Wrath* promises to be a Western populated by grotesque lizardmen who use ammunition that isn't merely live, it's actually *living*. But history says that in Oddworld, quirkiness is matched by excellence...and these three games prove it.

ABE'S ODDYSEE

A PERSONALITY-PACKED BEGINNING

PS1 | 1997

At the time of its debut, *Abe's Oddysee* was like nothing anyone had ever played. Although the action obviously took after *Prince of Persia*, the overall atmosphere, personality, and story of the game were truly unique.

"I think what sets [our games] apart is our attempt at meticulous attention to detail and artistry while also trying to be innovative with storytelling and character emotion during gameplay," creator Lorne Lanning says. "We wanted to bring more of what we saw happening in European graphic novels, that sense of detail, into CG and videogames. We wanted grittier textures and more dramatic lighting."

The game's story is equally sophisticated. Players take control of an escaped slave trying to prevent his kin from becoming the main course of the profit-driven glukkons. Lanning believes the political overtones (inspired by the plight of South African diamond miners) help set *Oddworld* above most other games. "Our series is definitely a reflection of personal views, and that is something we need to see more of today," he says.

With its emotional and intellectual appeal and its classy 2D graphics, *Abe's Oddysee* is remarkably durable. Unlike most PlayStation games of its era, it still feels fresh and engaging today. Which just goes to show that some things will always be fun (like dropping sligs into a meat grinder, for instance). And it helps that Abe is such an earnest, likable guy. As Lanning says, "Things that have a lot of heart have the potential for deeper, lasting impressions." ■

_Jeremy Parish



NOW...	Timeless action, and still beautiful	SOLID 8/10
THEN...	Charming, challenging, and charismatic	SPLENDID 9/10

ABE'S EXODDUS

MORE OF THE SAME?

PS1 | 1999



While *Abe's Oddysee* was a pleasant surprise for most gamers, *Exoddus* largely came off as underwhelming. The problem? It's almost exactly the same game as the first, from graphics and sound to puzzles and enemies.

Despite these similarities, Lanning was quick to stress that it was to be considered a side story rather than a chapter in the overall *Oddworld* quintology. "It was always the intent to have derivative titles spawned off of a quintology title," he says. "*Exoddus* was a way to flesh out more of the universe while also taking what we learned from the new engine development."

Fortunately, beyond the initial sense of déjà vu, it became obvious that *Exoddus* is every bit as solid and addictive as the original—and as a result, it holds up nearly as well. ■

_Jeremy Parish

NOW...	Still good, still a bit familiar	REPEAT 7/10
THEN...	Good stuff, if a bit familiar	REDUX 8/10

MUNCH'S ODDYSEE

ABE HITS A 3D, BUT STILL ODD, WORLD

XB | 2001

Munch's Oddysee was a bold attempt to take the *Oddworld* series into 3D, and it ultimately achieved what might best be called mixed results. Although the adventure is visually dazzling, the puzzles are more often repetitive than clever. The game also suffers from an awkward camera system and that bane of 3D adventures, endless item collection.

The move to 3D was further complicated by the middevelopment switch from PS2 to Xbox, a decision Lanning attributes to the fact that Microsoft's machine offered "a more fluid paintbrush to create with." He also blames overambitiousness for *Munch's* troubles: "I wanted to achieve something so badly that I was not realistic in the process."

That being said, in its best moments the game is clever indeed, making full use of both heroes and requiring an impressive degree of cooperation between Abe and newcomer Munch, reminiscent of Blizzard's *Lost Vikings*. Although it hasn't aged as well as its peers, *Munch* is still a perfectly respectable member of the *Oddworld* family.

_Jeremy Parish





NOW...	A little too clumsy for its own good	IFFY 6/10
THEN...	*Oddworld* in 3D with a few new flaws	SPIFFY 8/10

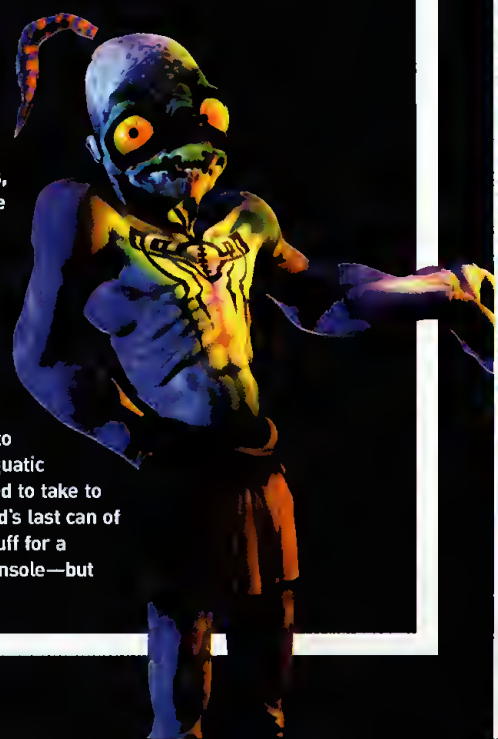
[UNDEADOG APPEAL]

WHY GO AANOLD WHEN GILLIGAN WILL DO?

Abe's Oddysee debuted right at the cusp of gamers' fascination with cool characters—Lara Croft and Cloud Strife were the big names in 1997. Mudokon savior Abe, on the other hand, is a far cry from the "tough fighters-big weapons" school of character design: a spindly janitor whose mouth has been sewn shut by his (very literal) corporate masters, and whose only defense through most of his adventure is quick thinking and the ability to possess enemies from afar.

Lanning indicates that this was a deliberate choice. "Underdogs are more interesting heroes," he says. "We don't care about the greatest soldier who isn't facing an overwhelming threat, we care about him when he's facing impossible odds."

It's hard to imagine a bigger underdog than Abe, but Munch (of *Munch's Oddysee*) certainly did his best to compete: As the last surviving member of a race of aquatic creatures endangered by overconsumption, he is forced to take to a wheelchair to cross land in order to rescue the world's last can of his own caviar and repopulate his kind. Pretty grim stuff for a flagship launch title of an aggressively mainstream console—but very much in the spirit of *Oddworld*.





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THIS MONTH IN MORE

HALF-LIFE 2 117
Gravity gun techniques, Combine soldier takedown tactics, and more

CONNECT 120
First impressions: *World of Warcraft*

GAME GEEZER 122
Drowning in the holiday deluge of games

HALF-LIFE 2

MAKE THAT LIFE LAST LONGER

Ready to cause some havoc? These tips and strategies will help you get through those sticky situations. On top of that, we've got detailed info on the zero-point energy-field manipulator (gravity gun) and Combine soldiers. Let's rock!

The following tips were excerpted from *Prima Games'* *Official Strategy Guide to Half-Life 2*. The full guide is on sale now; check www.primagames.com for availability.



GENERAL TECHNIQUES

EXPLORE THOROUGHLY, CLEAR YOUR AREA



During your adventure, inspect every nook and cranny and remember every junction where you missed a branching pathway and every ladder you didn't have time to climb. Thorough exploration usually provides the solution for a seemingly infuriating dead end, such as a gate that you can't open (chances are, a switch or other device lies nearby). Make sure you break open every supply crate, check every corner, and stop for a moment to inspect the walls, ceilings, and floors so you don't miss a hidden duct or passage. Don't flee a combat area—try securing an area before continuing to the next one.

SAVE OFTEN

Saving your game seems like a simple idea, but in the heat of battle, you can forget to and then have to replay major portions of a level. Whenever you reach a junction; after every battle or escape; and each time you peek around a corner, view a nasty enemy, and dart back behind cover, you should save.

EXPERIMENT

With a variety of weapons at your disposal, you'll find that dozens of possible methods exist for completing each area. Using a different weapon to clear the same area produces an entirely different gameplay experience each time you play. Remember that risky tactics are sometimes the most adrenaline pumping, so the next time you spot a squad of soldiers and think you can bludgeon them to death with a crowbar instead of using cover and a submachine gun, save your game and give it a try!

CRATE BLOCKING



In certain situations, you can actually use scenery items to your advantage, such as for destroying enemies or blocking their path. Adventuring in *Half-Life 2* isn't a simple matter of completing areas by laying waste to them—preventing enemies from chasing you by blocking their path is another tactic to try.

CARRYING ITEMS



Pressing E enables you to carry an item, although certain heavier items require a little more exertion, and some can't be lifted at all. Play with items to learn their behaviors when thrown, shoved, or otherwise manipulated and see which can become valuable weapons, movable cover, or crushing devices to use against the enemy.

G IS FOR GRAVITY



Be sure you use the G key to regularly switch between your last weapon and the gravity gun. This way, you can quickly flick between firepower and the ability to move scenery. For example, you can shove a wardrobe down some stairs and into an enemy, and then hit G to switch immediately to the pistol and finish off the wounded victim. Because the gravity gun is used more than any other weapon, flicking between it and your other most effective gun for the situation is quicker than manually cycling through all your firepower.

FULL-LIFE: STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

Before you begin your mission, make sure you remember at least a couple of the following tips to increase your chances of survival.

HEADS UP

Headshots: the only way to defeat your foes. Whenever possible, aim at your enemy's head, if it has one. The damage you inflict is tripled. Furthermore, when dealing with zombies, you can kill both the zombie and the headcrab controlling it by shooting the zombie in the head, whereas if you strike its body, the headcrab usually survives.



ZOOM, RELEASE, FIRE

With nimble keystrokes, you can turn any weapon into a sniper rifle. Press Z to use your suit's zoom function to inspect an enemy in the distance, get a good view, and then fire as you zoom out. You can wing a target from extreme range by using this method.



ANIMOSITY

Zombies and Combine soldiers just don't get along. Sentry guns programmed to attack will take out zombies for you. Watching zombies and antlions face off is a sight to behold. Likewise, witnessing an antlion guard devastate a Combine soldier squad is a thrilling and one-sided carnagefest. If there are two types of enemies in a single area, it is sometimes best to let their animosity play out. As well as being entertaining, it saves ammunition.

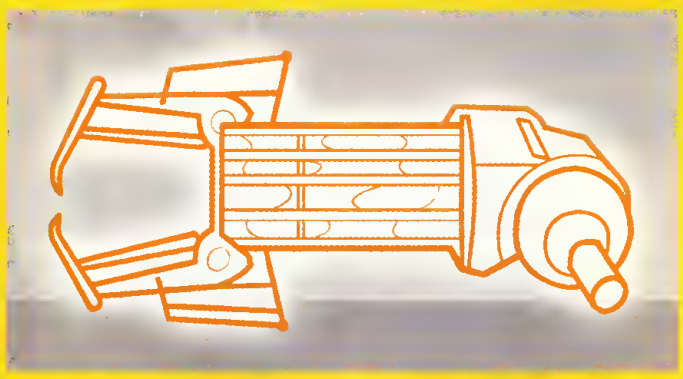


HEARING

Just as important as having an itchy trigger finger and being able to effectively circle-strafe is listening. You can actually hear enemies ahead, behind, or around you if you leave your ears open. Sometimes an enemy out of view can still be heard, allowing you to react before you see it.



ZERO-POINT ENERGY-FIELD MANIPULATOR (GRAVITY GUN)





→ PRIMARY FIRE CAPABILITIES



→ SECONDARY FIRE CAPABILITIES

CHAPTER LOCATED: 5, Black Mesa East
DAMAGE INFLICTED: Varies
SECONDARY FIRE: Yes

DESCRIPTION: The zero-point energy-field manipulation device emits an orange beam with inorganic-management capabilities.

TECHNIQUES

Also known as the physics cannon and the gravity gun, the zero-point energy-field manipulator is the most versatile, helpful, and sometimes devastating weapon you're likely to find. How you should use this weapon completely depends on your immediate environment since the gun allows you to be very creative with environmental items. The controls are described here, along with some general guidelines for how to apply the gravity gun's abilities.

A right-click sucks up objects (up to the size of a car) from their locations and into the gravity gun's field directly in front of you, where you can hold them. Another right-click drops them. Right-click object-pulling is a long-range technique.

A left-click blasts objects (up to the size of a car) away from you. The blast beam is powerful, but you can substantially increase this power by first sucking (right-click) an object toward you, then blasting it toward your target. Left-click pushing is a close-range technique.

Press G to swap between the gravity gun and the previous weapon used. This is useful for clearing a path while you are under fire and need to quickly flick between the gravity gun and a regular gun.

Now that you know how to suck and blast objects, here are some other techniques:

- Any object can be pushed or pulled, except for objects bolted to the ground or organic materials (such as Combine soldiers or Alyx).

- An object's weight and size determines the force and distance it travels when blasted. Small items (cans, small crates, saw blades) travel fast

and far. Medium items (radiators, washing machines) travel fast but not too far. Large items (cars) can only be pushed.

- Use radiators and similar objects that don't block your vision as projectiles against enemies. You can use the same item repeatedly and carry it along with you, which saves ammo. Saw blades work well for this.
- Stack items to gain access to upper areas and to help you grab supplies that you couldn't otherwise reach.
- Clear areas of debris quickly and effectively.
- Destroy barricades with a left-click blast.
- Use larger items (like cabinets) as shields or to block enemy movement.
- Manipulate explosive barrels carefully.
- Carry or blast extra ammo or health into areas you know you'll reach later.
- Destroy manhacks and rollermines by sucking them in and then blasting them into a wall or the ocean. You can hold the manhack to use it as a chain saw.
- Grab and blast back incoming grenades and energy orbs (you can't actually grab the orbs, but you can manipulate them for multiple kills).
- Catch or deflect large objects falling toward you.

COMBINE SOLDIER

FIRST SEEN:
Chapter 6, We don't go to Ravenholm
CHAPTER APPEARANCES: 6-14
HEALTH: 50
ATTACK DAMAGE: 10 (rifle butt)
3 (SMG per shot)
3 (Shotgun per shot)
3 (Pulse rifle per shot)
75 (Grenade per detonation)
THREAT LEVEL: HHHH
ENTITY TYPE: Humanoid (Overwatch)



NOTES AND ATTACK PATTERNS

Forming the shock troop of the hated Combine, soldiers are intelligent infantrymen who work well in a team and have multiple methods of attack—which attacks are used depends on the combat situation. They are armed with shotguns, SMGs, pulse rifles, and grenades, and they drop ammunition when they succumb to your fire. There are multiple ways to defeat Combine soldiers; some basic tactics are described here.









TAKEDOWN TACTICS

- Bring rapid-fire weapons to bear on their heads quickly.
- Listen to their weapons. If you hear a shotgun blast, focus on that soldier first.
- When fighting in dark corridors or tossing explosives around corners, listen for the long beep that indicates a soldier has been killed.
- Living soldiers can be heard via your HEV suit, and radio chatter indicates a menace. When combat chatter ceases, soldiers in the area have been defeated.
- Listen for the phrase "Outbreak! Outbreak! Outbreak!" during combat. This is the Combine code word that indicates only one soldier remains; combat should be easier from this point.
- When fighting soldiers inside structures from the outside, breaking a window and throwing in a grenade causes the most havoc and sometimes forces them out the building's doors and into your line of sight.
- Soldiers must reload just like you; if you hear them reloading, charge in and cut them down.
- Combine elite are particularly dangerous when you're fighting them on structures with a drop nearby; their "orb" attacks not only inflict sizable damage, but also shove you a short distance, which can result in a death plummet. Listen for the orb's charging sound, then immediately sidestep so the ball misses you. If you're gifted with quick reactions, use the gravity gun to catch the orb and shoot it back at them.
- Using your pulse rifle's secondary orb fire is an excellent way to destroy multiple soldiers. However, you can't collect any ammunition from a soldier killed this way.
- If you're inside a vehicle and spot some soldiers on the road, attempt to ram them; it's usually easy to strike them down for an instant kill.
- Hoppers, plentiful in City 17, are excellent for placing at entrances before a Combine soldier intrusion; a number of them will be caught in the explosion.
- Combine soldiers standing at extreme range should be destroyed with your crossbow or RPG.
- Soldiers carrying shotguns are especially brutal because they can unload into you rapidly, especially when panicked. Pick off these soldiers first, if possible.
- Back away from close combat because the soldier's rifle-butt attack is vicious and damaging.

CONNECT

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT

ONLINE GAMING

NO DISC INSERTED

I'm so tired of seeing this. Every time I want to fire up *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*, or play a quick multiplayer game of *Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow*, or even just log in to *StarCraft* to refresh my Battle.net account, I am confronted with this obtrusive message.

Just what, exactly, is the deal with this? Why do I need to insert my CD? I bought the game, didn't I? I entered the silly 16-digit CD key when I installed it, right? I clicked the little "I agree" button next to the license agreement, yes? So what is the freakin' disc still needed for? Copy protection? Please. That's about as effective as those old Sierra loading screens that described the horrible penalties for software piracy. It's easy enough to find a no-CD crack for almost any PC title out there, and if you ask me, the hassle is worth it even for those who own legitimate copies.

For whatever it's worth, *EverQuest II* and *City of Heroes* don't insist on the game disc being in the drive when you load them up. Neither does *World of WarCraft*. Somehow, despite all their glaring inadequacies, MMOs seem to be just a little more user-friendly in this regard. I can't help but continue to wonder what the holdup is for the rest of the PC gaming market. These aren't consoles, folks. Can we just not have to deal with the stupid discs?

_Ryan Scott is the previews editor of *Computer Gaming World*.

ADVENTURES IN AZEROTH

GMR DIPS ITS FEET INTO THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT

UPDATE

With *World of WarCraft* finally out, we thought we'd chime in with our progress thus far and give our impressions on the hot new MMORPG.

Despite a deluge of server-related problems (read: Too many people logging on all at once resulted in massive server overload, causing games to crash, players to get booted, and message boards to fill with complaints from on high), things eventually settled down once Blizzard doubled the number of servers, allowing players to actually play the game.

Upon firing up our copy of the game (we have the Collector's Edition, which gives any character we create a free in-game pet: a zergling, a panda cub, or a mini-diablo), we created more than a few characters to help us become acquainted with as many aspects of the game as possible. With four alliance characters, Milkman (paladin), Starcraft (warlock), Arabesque (hunter), and Gatecrasher (rogue); and one horde character, Threat (warrior), we have a pretty good handle on how a large variety of the game plays.

No matter what race you begin as, mission objectives seem to break down into a series of "Kill X amount of these; bring us X amount of those" *Diablo II*-style fetch quests. You also die a lot early on, but the sour sting of death is tempered by the sweet, sweet revival system that allows players to retrieve their corpse (via a cool-looking Frodo-puts-on-the-Ring effect) and not lose any experience. Best of all, you can't delevel in *WOW* (Take THAT, *FFXI*!).

As we spent a few days leveling up our characters, we formed parties with cool players we met on the Lightbringer server and a few friends from our *FFXI* linkshell. We soon created a guild, once again called Roundabouts, in *WOW*. Now we're farming and doing missions so as to gather up the 10 gold that is required to design our guild crest. At this early level, that's quite a bit of money, especially when you have to pay to learn job skills and while leveling craft skills. We'll be OK, though. Check back next month for the full scoop.

_James Mielke











→ Fishing in *WOW* is one of the most relaxing ways in which you can whittle away precious moments of your life. Casting your rod in the gently trickling streams of Azeroth has a soothing quality other games can't match. Once your fishing level gets high enough (over 100), you can fish by the ocean, and you often snag valuable treasure chests and items.

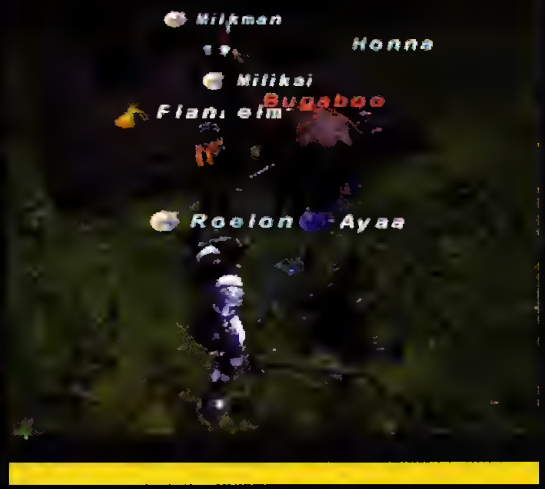


MY LIFE IN VANA'DIEL

A MONTHLY TRAVELOGUE OF ONE EDITOR'S TIME IN FINAL FANTASY XI



The Roundabouts take a breather while leveling in Bibiki Bay.



→ The Roundies make short work of Monastic Cavern resident NM, Bugaboo, who was the last stop between Milkman and his Bard AF3 body armor.





Kikai



Paladin

MILKMAN



RED MAGE/WHITE MAGE

MAIN JOB LEVEL: 68
SUBJOB LEVEL: 34
NATION: WINDURST
RACE: HUME
SERVER: SIREN
LINKSHELL: ROUNDABOUTS

This month has meant three things: Carbuncle Mitts, Opo-opo Crown, and Bard Artifact gear. Here's how this exhausting process went.

Carbuncle Mitts, which only summoners can equip (at level 20), have a defense rating of 5 and add 14 MP, but have an undocumented benefit of reducing Carbuncle perpetuation cost by -4 MP. This means that the MP drain of having Carbuncle out is reduced significantly, which makes it a great piece of gear. Getting it, however, is a different matter. To pop the NM monster, the Crimson-toothed Pawberry, you must first get Offerings of Uggalepih, which spawns only once every two hours in the Temple of Uggalepih. This is very tough, as the area is filled with aggressive tonberries (who will dump a ton of ancient magic on you) and giant dolls, who aggro to magic (making casting invisible especially tricky). Once I had the Offerings, though, I took my two-party alliance to the specific spot and popped the NM. Faster than anyone could see, the tonberry whipped out his own Carbuncle, which then cast Searing Light, one-shotting our white mage Sentinel out of existence and taking me down below 300 HP even though I had on all the best RDM buffs money could buy. Still, once the alliance descended on the NM, the fight was soon over, and I was up one pair of Carbuncle Mitts.

The Opo-opo Crown is a major piece of gear that is especially valuable to Bards (my second primary job). While the basic stats are nice, when a pamama is eaten while wearing it, the crown gives the added bonus of +14 Charisma, which offsets its normal -7 CHR. Plus, it adds +50HP and +50MP when the fruit is eaten. The tricky part in getting this crown is it requires 10 offerings to various opo-opos found wandering around Kazham. Some of the items are common ones that can be purchased at the AH (workbench, blackened frog, etc.), but others, like the wyvern skull, can only be gotten by killing Hurricane Wyverns in Ifrit's Cauldron. But thanks to the persistent help of 75WAR friend Ayaa, 75WHM Jyneefur, and our very own Roundabouts, I was able to get the last, most difficult items and walk away with the distinctive crown.

My biggest satisfaction, though, came from hitting level 52 as Bard, and with Ayaa, Wraeth, Flannelman, Milikai, Roelon, Honna, and other friends in tow, getting all of my Chorale artifact gear. Now all I have to do is find the time to level up and fit myself into it. Good times. Good friends. Good enough.

_James Mielke

This month, Milkman gets busy taking his ass to level 70, so that he can face the ultimate test: The Red Mage one-on-one battle versus Maat. Damn.



GAME GEEZER

HE'S OLD! HE'S PISSED!

HOLIDAY EXCESS

"Hi, Game Geezer! Happy holidays, sir!"

Ah, put a cork in it. "Happy holidays!" Bah! The only thing happy about 'em is that they're all over soon and my relatives will go back to their mental wards and chicken farms and whatever other holes they crawl out of every year to torment me at this time. I swear, if I have to watch my cousin Frances—the one with the ugly-ass mole on her cheek—eat her rice pudding with her mouth open one more time, I'm going to projectile-vomit right at the damn dinner table!

"We knew we could count on you for a little Christmas cheer, sir, thank you. Could we just ask you one question, though? If you hate the holidays so much, why are you wrapping presents now?"

Glad you asked. See this here? This is Mrs. Geezer's new broom! I'm hoping this year she'll finally fly up into some telephone wires and electrocute herself! Ha ha! I'm just kiddin' ya. It's gonna take more than electrocution to kill old Godzilla in there! Maybe I should just feed her some of her own cooking!

"Um, sir? Do you have a point this month? Like, something about videogaming?"

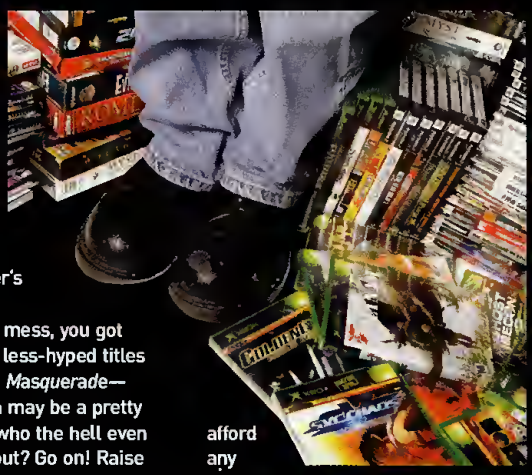
Yeah, yeah. I'm getting to it, ya brats! You see the rest of these gifts here? Calendars! For every moronic videogame publisher in the business!

"Calendars?"

Yeah, calendars! Because judging from the gigantic pile of new games that just showed up, it looks like they need to be refamiliarized with it!

I see you looking kinda stupid there as usual, so let me explain. Ya see, here on the calendar, as I reckon it, we have 12 full months a year to work with. You with me so far? All righty. Well, see, the game publishers here, they don't seem to get that. To them, there are only two months in a year: November and December. That's why every freakin' big game of the year just came out within the last few weeks.

Here's just a partial list of what's shown up on my desk this month: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, *Halo 2*, *Half-Life 2*, *World of WarCraft*, *Metroid Prime 2*, *EverQuest II*, *Killzone*—and those are just the big ones! Just *GTA* alone is gonna take me weeks to play! Even longer if I run out of Mrs. Geezer's laudanum!



Now into this mess, you got people releasing less-hyped titles like *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines*, which may be a pretty good game, but who the hell even noticed it came out? Go on! Raise your hand if you've even heard of that game, let alone bought it! All that hard work by the developers, just to let the game get totally lost in the holiday glut! Good strategy!

Now, what would have happened if Activision had just been patient, waited for all the *Halo/Half-Life/GTA* hoopla to pass, and released this thing, say, in March, when none of us have a damn thing to play anymore!

Game publishers: We're not made outta money here. Some of us are already down to feeding our families just a couple times a week so we can afford any games at all. When you shovel out a whole stinkin' barrelful of 'em at once, well, we're just not gonna buy 'em all, it's as simple as that. Why go up against monsters like *Halo 2*? Why set yourself up for failure like that?

We play games all year. Every dang day. That's about *all* we do. So bleed the money out of us all year long at a slower rate. And then maybe we'll hate you just a little bit less.

"Happy holidays?" As one of my old childhood friends used to say: "Bah! Humbug!"

PUBLISHERS THINK THERE ARE ONLY TWO MONTHS IN A YEAR.

photo by Andrew Mendoza

The views expressed by Game Geezer are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of *GMR*.



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FORGET WHAT YOU THINK YOU KNOW

Resident Evil reinvents itself as the series moves in a terrifying new direction. U.S. agent Leon Kennedy has been tasked to look into the abduction of the President's daughter and his investigation has led him to a mysterious location in Europe. As Leon encounters unimaginable horrors, he must find out what is behind the terror.

resident evil 4



EVIL HAS EVOLVED

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- Cunning enemies use their abilities to team up and attack the player en mass.
- Commandeer vehicles… but don't expect a safe ride.






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M
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Intense Violence

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NINTENDO GAMECUBE

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